

Classroom on the Land

Sandy Little, Heather Fikowski, and Pertice Moffitt

ABSTRACT

Told through a day in the experience of being in camp with Elder Lawrence Casaway, former instructors in the Aurora College Social Work Program share the importance of learning in camp for students and faculty. The knowledge, experience, and joy that Lawrence and the land provided the students at camp was a key part of the learning experience for all involved, and impacted the participants beyond the week-long camp.



Lawrence at his home, Dettah, 2022.

Picture this: An agile Elder is piloting his boat up the Yellowknife River, his passengers dressed warmly for the cool May morning. The wind blows in from across the still frozen Great Slave Lake, and there are patches of snow blanketing the bush. Despite the cold, the river is open and there are fish nets and muskrat traps to check...



Willideh Site, Yellowknife River ice break-up in May.

That Elder is Lawrence Casaway. Lawrence was born in Rocher River, which at the time was a vibrant Dene community nestled in rich hunting and fishing territories. This was where he learned bush skills, traditional Dene values, and to speak and write his Chipewyan language. In 2005, Lawrence was invited to share his traditional knowledge with several Aurora College, Yellowknife Campus, classes seeking on-the-land learning experiences. In 2008, he took on the responsibility of lead Elder, setting up an annual seven-day Cultural Camp for the Social Work Diploma Program that had been relocated from Fort Smith to Yellowknife. For over eleven years, until the conclusion of the Social Work Diploma Program in 2018, Lawrence provided exceptional and unforgettable teaching to social work students and their instructors at the Willideh Site, a traditional gathering place of the Yellowknives Dene.

Lawrence's classroom is on the land. He is passionate about his Dene culture and about passing along history, traditional skills, Chipewyan language, and Dene values to students in many different professions. Social Work students particularly benefitted from the intensity of setting up and living in camp for seven days and nights. Lawrence's teaching skills were evident in setting up tents/tipis, setting nets, traps, snares, harvesting and processing animals and fish, navigating the bush and the water, leading talking circles, teaching the Chipewyan language, and in supporting the participants' understanding of the history and impacts of colonization, Treaties, and Residential Schools. Every single activity and conversation with Lawrence contained a lesson.

A typical day with Lawrence at camp would begin with crackling fires in the tents from which students would slowly emerge. They would gather water from the river and chop wood for the kitchen fire so that coffee, porridge, and sizzling breakfast could be prepared by the camp cook. Lawrence would greet students with big smiles and an eagerness that was more effective motivation than the camp coffee. Some would join him on the boat to check the nets and traps while others would take on the tasks around camp or steal themselves away to work on various projects, like beading or making small birch bark canoes. Embedded in these activities was building an understanding of and respect for the land and water. Students learned to read the land, water, and ice conditions, and came to understand how Dene people have thrived in partnership with the land, water, and wildlife for generations.



Smoking tipi with rabbits, ducks, caribou, and fish.

Lunch would happen in the midst of the work of making dry fish or filleting the fish for supper that evening. Lawrence would spend afternoons with everyone, teaching them about the land and how to live respectfully with it. He would guide the participants with patience, skill, and gentle encouragement to prepare the fish, muskrat, beaver, and ducks that would be hauled up with pride from the boat launch a couple of times each day. In these hours, he was sharing an understanding of and respect for animals and fish, where they live, what they eat, and how to respectfully harvest them.

Sometimes in the afternoons, Lawrence could be found sharing photos from his past and the stories that went along with them. The importance of history emerged within these conversations. The story of Rocher River, understanding Treaties, the forced relocation of community, the impacts of colonization and residential schooling, and a deep empathy for Indigenous peoples who were dislocated from their land and brutalized by the psychosocial impacts of colonization. For example, Lawrence shared stories of those who are living on the streets of Yellowknife, some of whom are from Rocher River. In these stories, he demonstrated and encouraged empathy and respect. Other times, Lawrence would have a small gathering of students around him, sitting in the sun, and teaching his language. Language is important to Lawrence; speaking it, writing it, and keeping it alive.



Teaching Chipewyan oral language and written syllabics.

Evenings held quieter, but equally powerful moments. Lawrence shared his skills at facilitating circles or giggled his way through Scott McQueen's traditional storytelling. Scott's father was one of Lawrence's trapping partners, and Scott brought his family's cherished stories from Rocher River and wove them together with Lawrence's history of living off the land. Students were enthralled with the stories, and they deepened their understanding about the Dene.

Though he was the camp Elder and the one whom students admired for his knowledge and skill, Lawrence also demonstrated a keenness to learn from others. He enjoyed and was fascinated by the stories, experiences, and cultural diversity of students who joined with backgrounds from all parts of the world. He would encourage and try their cooking, ways of preparing animals, and come to understand different ways of knowing from students of diverse backgrounds. Lawrence taught and modelled ways to honour culture and diversity by celebrating every student and demonstrating interest in learning about their various cultures, countries, and belief systems.



Hands-on teaching: How to skin a beaver.

By the end of a day at camp, several students would have their names written on their work gloves in Chipewyan. As evening approached and with stomachs full from supper, Lawrence would continue to weave lessons in with a caring, engaging manner that never really felt like a lesson at all. Rather, it felt easy, natural, and respectful. It was a joyful experience that fit into an evolving way of understanding, and it left students eager to begin again the next day. Lawrence prided himself on having students set up and tear down the camp; there were important survival lessons within that. He also seamlessly shifted from teaching to encouraging students to take on the role of teacher. He was witness to the group's growth which was so evident in those last few days where he watched a camp function rhythmically, easily, efficiently, and peacefully.



Students set up canvas tents and woodstoves and chopped the wood to heat their tents.

There were many life-changing outcomes from Lawrence's cultural camp. Some Indigenous students were able to re-connect with their own traditional teachings and become leaders in the camp. Non-Indigenous students gained deeper respect for Dene expertise, values and skills which continue to support them on their journey towards enacting reconciliation. Lawrence encouraged students from outside Denendeh to share their cultural ways of preparing fish or ducks. Some of the most poignant learning moments were with Indigenous students who arrived at the bush classroom feeling shame about their lack of traditional knowledge. With Lawrence's gentle acceptance and teaching, they were able to revitalize their connections with the land, language, and ceremony. These students left camp with a renewed sense of purpose and a commitment to teach their children the skills gifted to them by Lawrence.



Lawrence demonstrating how to stretch a beaver pelt.

Over the years, many students shared positive comments about Lawrence through an evaluation process. The last culture camp concluded in 2018, as the social work program was about to be discontinued. Knowing that this eleven-year journey was coming to a close, the faculty wrote Lawrence a letter of appreciation incorporating the students' words. These two quotes from that letter exemplify the impact that Lawrence had on students' social work education:

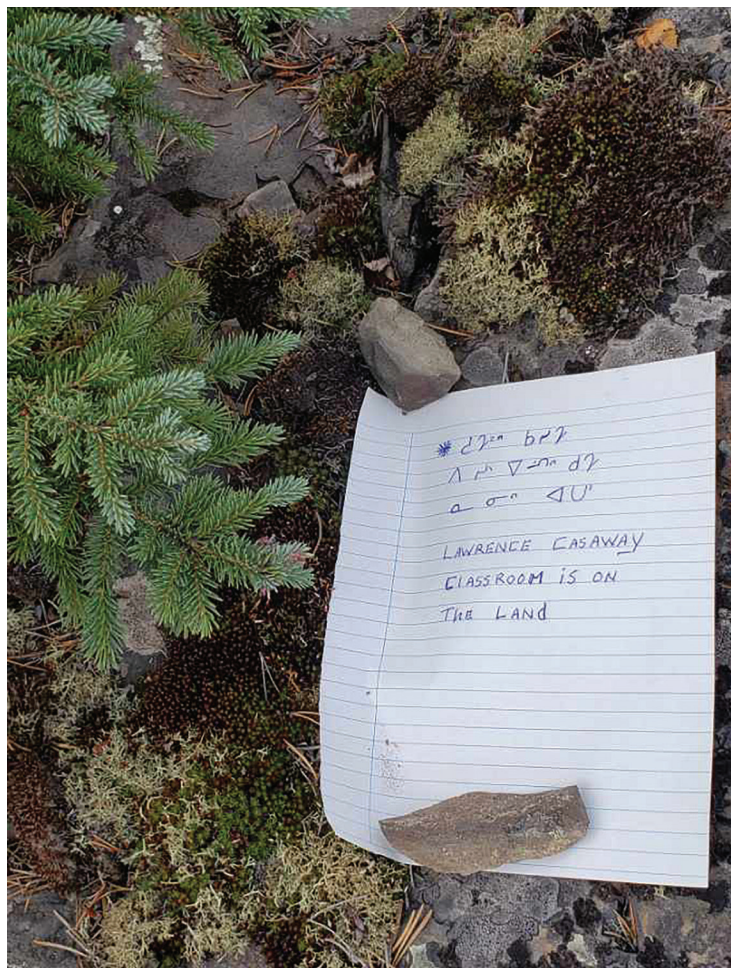
- "Lawrence showed incredible patience and kindness towards me both during my culture camp week as well when I had the opportunity to visit a couple of years later. Lawrence gave me the confidence and the knowledge I needed to feel comfortable working in the social work field. Memories of him and his teachings is something I think of often and continues to keep me grounded when I have doubts about what I am doing. He is someone that I will always be grateful for, I can honestly say I would not be the same person I am today if it were not for him – and I only had one week with him!"
- "Alexander the Great once said, 'I am indebted to my father for living, but my teacher for living well.' Lawrence Casaway's classroom is on the land, and he has the heart of a great teacher. What distinguishes Lawrence is his hands-on teaching approach and that he himself is a student of all cultures, often asking others how their people fished or hunted. Lawrence brings an authentic richness of character and spirit to what he is teaching, and for this reason he is a teacher that has enabled me in living well."

Faculty also learned from their relationship with Lawrence and his camp. Lawrence's teachings impacted the entire Social Work program, which was evidenced in the classroom. For example, an anti-oppression course evolved from theoretical dialogue and readings in the classroom to community-based photo journaling of students' learning and understanding. The Cultural Competence in Social Work Practice course moved further away from instructor-led teaching to facilitated education with a variety of Elders and cultural knowledge-keepers who helped transform students' social work practice. Over the years, faculty offices and classrooms held hides, birch bark baskets and canoes, and photos from every year of camp. These were daily reminders that guided the instructors to reflect in the classroom what they had observed in Lawrence's teaching style and spirit when in the bush:

- To seek out and support the unique strengths of all students, honour their commitment to learning, and respect each person's personal journey towards their educational goals.
- To be encouraging, patient, kind, and humble; though instructors in a classroom, they are learning alongside the students within the questions asked and thoughtful reflections offered.
- To be proud of what is being taught and acknowledge that the profession of social work has a challenging history within Canada and the north. Remember that history and move forward humbly in our journey towards reconciliation as the graduates entered the field with hope, energy, knowledge, skill and an openness to lifelong learning.

As this article was being drafted, Lawrence provided additional comments from his perspective. He was extremely humble about his contributions to the success of the bush classroom and cultural camp. He gently insisted that this article highlight the teamwork, trust, and relationships co-created between Indigenous Elders, support staff, and social work instructors that provided the special ingredients for student learning at camp and beyond.

Mahsi cho, Lawrence! We continue to learn with you.



Message from Lawrence (Chipewyan & English)

Sandy Little, MSW, RSW, is a settler who has lived in Treaty 8 territory, traditional land of the Yellowknives Dene, since 1995, raising her family and practicing social work in community mental health. Sandy was the Senior Instructor, Social Work, at Aurora College from 2007 - 2018 where she had the joy of participating in the annual cultural camp. She is currently the Manager, Mental Health and Community Wellness for the Northwest Territories Health and Social Services Authority. Sandy continues to value and learn from Lawrence's cultural wisdom.

Heather Fikowski, MSW RSW, is a settler from Alberta who has lived on Treaty 8 territory, traditional lands of the Yellowknives Dene, since 2002, practicing in the field of social work as a clinician, educator and researcher. She taught in the Social Work program at Aurora College from 2007-2016 and enjoyed learning from Lawrence during that time, particularly valuing the life-long relationship with his family and hers that developed over those years. Currently, Heather is with Aurora College working to help rebuild a Bachelor of Social Work program and looks forward to the guidance that Lawrence will passionately and humbly offer.

Pertice Moffitt worked as a nurse educator at Aurora College for many years. She had the wonderful opportunity to assist the social work team by spending a week with them at culture camp with Lawrence Casaway. She writes, "It is a memory I cherish."