

Creating and Sustaining a Community of Practice for Instructional Leaders: Acquiring and Applying Indigenous Foundational Knowledge

Introduction

This learning guide has been created to support the facilitator(s) who have been identified to set up and facilitate a Community of Practice for Instructional Leaders: Acquiring and Applying Indigenous Foundational Knowledge.

This guide will provide the facilitator with the following:

- **a definition of a community of practice;**
- **suggestions for setting up a community of practice;**
- **related resources.**



“We’re all stories, in the end.
Just make it a good one, eh?”

- Doctor Who



What is a Community of Practice?

A community of practice (CoP) is a group of people who share a common concern, a set of problems, or an interest in a topic, and come together to fulfill both individual and group goals. The design of each CoP will look different depending on the purpose and needs of the participants.

The purpose of the *Community of Practice for Instructional Leaders: Acquiring and Applying Indigenous Foundational Knowledge* is to create a space where school leaders strengthen their instructional leadership to lead learning related to Indigenous foundational knowledge, and its application in relation to the Leadership Quality Standard. Leaders will learn strategies, processes, and resources for supporting all members of their school community (teachers, students and the larger community) in order to acquire and apply foundational knowledge.

Key components of this CoP comprise the following: working collaboratively with a group of instructional leaders, interacting with the CoP on a regular basis, and engaging in context-based dialogue related to supporting their school community in acquiring and applying Indigenous foundational knowledge in relation to the Leadership Quality Standard. A practical, authentic component to the CoP will include the opportunity to visit several schools in order to learn from the leaders of the hosting schools who have successfully supported their school community in acquiring and applying Indigenous foundational knowledge. Guided tours through the hosting schools will provide multiple opportunities to listen to the school's "stories" about their journey in acquiring and applying Indigenous foundational knowledge.



“All that we are is story. From the moment we are born to the time we continue on our spirit journey, we are involved in the creation of the story of our time here. It is what we arrive with. It is all we leave behind. We are not the things we accumulate. We are not the things we deem important. We are story. All of us. What comes to matter then is the creation of the best possible story we can while we’re here; you, me, us, together. When we can do that and we take the time to share those stories with each other, we get bigger inside, we see each other, we recognize our kinship—we change the world, one story at a time...”

- Richard Wagamese



Suggestions to set up a Community of Practice

The information shared below represents one way to set up a *Community of Practice for Instructional Leaders: Acquiring and Applying Indigenous Foundational Knowledge*.

The suggested strategies and processes should be modified to reflect local context, as well as to meet the learning needs of the members of the CoP.

1. Identify a Facilitator

The facilitator's role is a balance of consulting, connecting, helping, and guiding. It is important that a skillful and reputable facilitator is identified—one who is able to provide visible support to leaders without micro-managing the work of the CoP. The facilitator will be tasked to make decisions, create conditions for learning, and engage participants in strategic conversations prior to, and throughout the life of the CoP. The facilitator could be a single person, or two or more people who share responsibilities. A key success factor of a CoP is the dedication and skill of the facilitator(s) who will take the initiative and responsibility to nurture the community. Many communities fail, not because members have lost interest, but because not everyone has sufficient energy and time to take care of logistics, and/or to coordinate the space for deep and meaningful learning.

Sample duties of the facilitator may include the following :

- Promoting and advertising the CoP;
- Recruiting leaders to host school visits;

- Co-planning with school-based leaders and co-facilitating school visits;
- Coordinating design of a shared online workspace;
- Creating post-surveys to measure impact;
- Coordinating communication with participants throughout the lifespan of community.

2. Recruit exemplary school leaders who are willing to host school visits

The success of this CoP will lie in the quality of the visits to the three to four schools within the district or region over the course of a school year. As much as possible, the facilitator should strive to select a variety of schools: different divisions (e.g. elementary, middle and high school), public, private or charter schools, or schools with a particular focus (e.g. sports alternative). A variety of schools will offer CoP members with real life examples of the ways in which supporting the school community in acquiring and applying Indigenous foundational knowledge is similar across schools, as well as ways it might unfold differently depending on the context of the school.

It is important to select schools that are led by leaders who have had experience and success in supporting their school community in acquiring and applying Indigenous foundational knowledge in their school or district. The leader may be the school principal, assistant principal, another school-based leader, or a combination of leaders.

Suggestions to set up a Community of Practice

Look for leaders who demonstrate characteristics such as the following:

- Have collaborated with local Indigenous Elders, knowledge keepers in their work to support the school community in acquiring and applying Indigenous foundational knowledge;
- Are well respected in the educational and Indigenous community;
- Are humble and sensitive, yet confident and passionate about the work;
- Are reflective and committed to life-long learning;
- Are willing to share successes frankly and honestly, as well as the challenges/ roadblocks (i.e. the real story—not a “show”);
- Are willing/able to include teachers or other staff in their school who can share their stories about acquiring and applying Indigenous foundational knowledge.

Finding schools and leaders who are willing/able to host a school visit may take some time, however. To be ready to launch this CoP at the beginning of the school year, begin the recruiting process early in the spring, so as to be ready for the fall start up. Recommendations from district leaders (superintendents, assistant superintendents, and so on) are often a good starting point in identifying leaders/schools who align with the above characteristics.

As part of the recruiting process, one-on-one conversations with potential host leaders about their role in this CoP will be critical. That is, potential host leaders must clearly understand

the purpose of the school visit, and the expectations related to hosting a visit before agreeing to host a visit to their school. There should be no surprises. Details related to hosting a school visit, as outlined in section 5, Engage in Pre-visit to Hosting Schools, should be discussed during the recruiting process, as well as finalized once the hosting leaders/schools are confirmed. The facilitator of the CoP should ensure the host leaders are clear about the expectations, and comfortable in their role as host.

Once host leaders are identified, the facilitator will need to collaborate with these leaders to set times and dates for each school visit throughout the school year. Avoid scheduling visits in September, May or June, as school start-up and year-end activities can present challenges for both the hosting leaders, as well as the participants in the CoP. To sustain the CoP members’ learning about how to support their school community in acquiring and applying Indigenous foundational knowledge, try to schedule school visits once every two to three months between October and April as much as possible.

To that end, collaborate with the hosting leaders to establish start and end times for each visit, as well. Generally speaking, half-day visits are better attended: full day visits are difficult for CoP members to commit to. Half days visits go by very quickly; full days allow more time to engage in deep dialogue, meaningful reflection and planning. Decisions related to full day or half-day visits should be based on local context. As much as possible, start and end times should be the same for each school visit in order to avoid confusion.



Suggestions to set up a Community of Practice

3. Actively Advertise and Promote the Community of Practice

The next step for the facilitator is to write the descriptor of the CoP, as well as to advertise and promote the CoP across their region, using various media channels that have proven successful. Begin advertising at least two months in advance of the first date set for the CoP. The descriptor should clearly communicate the purpose and focus of the CoP: learn how to strengthen instructional leadership to lead learning related to Indigenous foundational knowledge and its application in relation to the Leadership Quality Standard. Membership in this community of practice should consist of leaders who are not only personally passionate and committed to learning about building their own Indigenous foundational knowledge, but desirous of strengthening instructional leadership in order to lead learning related to Indigenous foundational knowledge, and its application in relation to the Leadership Quality Standard.

See page 7 for a sample descriptor



4. Design and Facilitate an Orientation Session

Communities of practice, by definition, are opportunities for participants to learn from one another. Because of the diverse membership from across geographic regions, structured opportunities for participants to get to know and connect with one another should be designed into the first day.

A successful orientation session sets the tone for the CoP, providing participants with the opportunity to deepen their understanding of their role in the CoP. The facilitator will play a key role during the orientation session, and may consider incorporating the one or all of following the ideas/strategies into the orientation session:

Build relationships

The success of a community of practice is dependent on creating an environment of mutual respect and trust in which there is a growing willingness to share ideas, expose one's knowledge gaps, ask difficult questions, and listen carefully.

Modeling Indigenous ways of learning and knowing are key to this CoP. The facilitator should consult with a local Elder or Indigenous person to aid in the planning of this session. The Elder may be willing to open the session with a prayer and smudging, as well as to facilitate a sharing circle, in which participants are invited to introduce themselves, and begin to find areas of common interest, by sharing the kinds of expertise they can offer one another related to acquiring and applying Indigenous foundational knowledge.

Suggestions to set up a Community of Practice

A sample descriptor is shared below:

A Community of Practice for Leaders: Acquiring and Applying Indigenous Foundational Knowledge in Your School Community

Facilitator:

Dates: This is a multi-day event: [list dates here]

Date/Time	Location
	Orientation session at [location]
	First school visit
	Second school visit
	Third school visit
	Fourth school visit

Who should attend: K - 12 school or district leaders (Directors, Principals, Assistant Principals, Curriculum Coordinators, Department Heads, and other school based leaders) who have a personal passion and commitment to build Indigenous foundational knowledge in and across their school or district.

About this learning opportunity:

This Community of Practice (CoP) is designed for leaders who have a personal desire to enhance their own Indigenous foundational knowledge, as well as to learn how to strengthen their instructional leadership to lead learning related to Indigenous foundational knowledge and its application in relation to the Leadership Quality Standard. Participants in this CoP will have the opportunity to learn from leaders who have experienced success (and overcome challenges) in supporting their school community in acquiring and applying Indigenous foundational knowledge in their schools.

Members of this CoP will meet [monthly, four times throughout the year, [...]] to engage in professional learning that includes an orientation session, visits to a variety of schools to view exemplary leadership in action and to hear their school's "story", as well as

to engage in professional dialogue, networking, and self-reflection.

Details

- The series will begin with a half day orientation session in [name the month], followed up with [number] half-day/whole day visits to [name of area] schools.
- At each school, participants will engage in a variety of processes and activities, including the following: dialogue and Q & A with the host principal; tour of the school; connect what was heard/observed to Competency Five in the Leadership Quality Standard and Teaching Quality Standard; review current literature, research, and resources; share artifacts; discuss/reflect/plan ways to implement some of the ideas observed or shared during the visit.
- Use the resource Supporting Awareness, Understanding and Application of Indigenous Foundational Knowledge: A Planning And Implementation Tool to assist in creating successful plans in their own school.
- Provide an opportunity to consolidate the learning during a final school visit luncheon.

Cost: _____

Link to register: _____

About the Facilitator: _____



Suggestions to set up a Community of Practice

Other introduction activities can also be included, such as the “people search” activity, in which participants connect the people they are meeting with specific contexts or topics related to the community of practice. In this leader-focused community it may be helpful to make time for each participant to share details of their particular learning environment. Getting a clear picture of how other people are working, including school composition (e.g. number of classes, ages of students, number of staff, and so on), how resources are organized, school vision, and how staffing works will help participants better understand each others’ contexts. A simple Google Doc or Google Folder will make this task easier, and will ensure all relevant information is collected, as well as facilitate online connections between visits.

Engage CoP Members in Personal Reflection

Engaging the participants in self-reflection and professional dialogue around why they believe it is important to deepen their own Indigenous foundational knowledge, as well as why they believe it is important to support their school community in acquiring and applying Indigenous foundational knowledge, is an important first important step in this CoP journey. This personal reflection gives leaders the opportunity to clarify and confirm their personal beliefs, as well as to deepen their confidence and resolve to move forward. As members of the CoP return to their schools and begin to lead the work of acquiring and applying Indigenous foundational knowledge, they may be challenged by some stakeholders about the reason(s) the school is embarking on this learning. The self-reflection and professional dialogue in which the CoP members engage will serve each instructional leader well when faced with challenges in their

own school community, and give them the confidence to lead and respond in a respectful, committed fashion.

Examples of strategies to engage CoP members in self reflection and dialogue include:

- View the video [What is Reconciliation?](#) and discuss its implications;
- Share the most recent statistics about Indigenous demographics, locally and provincially: where Treaties and settlements are located in Alberta, where residential schools were located, and discussing how this information may create a sense of urgency in building Indigenous foundation knowledge.
- Invite Elders to share personal stories about their past histories or residential school experiences, or current challenges facing the Indigenous peoples.
- Invite participants to consider what acquiring and applying Indigenous foundational knowledge would look like through the lens of “more/less” strategy.



Suggestions to set up a Community of Practice

What needs to change in our school as we build Indigenous foundational knowledge?

What we would like to see less of:	What we would like to see more of:

- Competency 5 of the Leadership Quality Standard and Teaching Quality Standard may also be included as part of the personal reflection as it offers leaders the opportunity to reflect on their level of understanding and confidence to lead in this area.

Leadership Quality Standard, Competency 5:

Supporting the Application of Foundational Knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit

(1) A principal supports the school community in acquiring and applying foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit for the benefit of all students. Achievement of this competency is demonstrated by indicators such as:

(a) understanding the historical, social, economic, and political implications of:

- treaties and agreements with First Nations;
- agreements with Métis; and
- residential schools and their legacy;

(b) aligning school resources and building the capacity of the school community to support First Nations, Métis and Inuit student achievement;

(c) enabling all school staff and students to gain a knowledge and understanding of, and

respect for, the histories, cultures, languages, contributions, perspectives, experiences and contemporary contexts of First Nations, Métis and Inuit; and

(d) pursuing opportunities and engaging in practices to facilitate reconciliation within the school community.

Teaching Quality Standard, Competency 5:

A teacher develops and applies foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit for the benefit of all students.

Achievement of this competency is demonstrated by indicators such as:

(a) understanding the historical, social, economic, and political implications of:

- treaties and agreements with First Nations;
- legislation and agreements negotiated with Métis; and
- residential schools and their legacy;

(b) supporting student achievement by engaging in collaborative, whole school approaches to capacity building in First Nations, Métis and Inuit education;

(c) using the programs of study to provide opportunities for all students to develop a knowledge and understanding of, and respect for, the histories, cultures, languages, contributions, perspectives, experiences and contemporary contexts of First Nations, Métis and Inuit; and

(d) supporting the learning experiences of all students by using resources that accurately reflect and demonstrate the strength and diversity of First Nations, Métis and Inuit.



Suggestions to set up a Community of Practice

Engage CoP Members in Personal Reflection

Providing opportunities to provide meaningful input into the shaping of the CoP will create a sense of ownership and commitment. Stimulating questions could include the following:

- **Learning:** Beyond the big idea of learning how to lead and support their school community in acquiring and applying Indigenous foundational knowledge, what are the specific learning goals of the community, and how can collaborative learning be supported to achieve shared goals?
- **Activities:** How can Indigenous ways of knowing and learning support the emergence of community presence?
- **Communication:** How will members communicate on an ongoing basis to accomplish the community's primary purpose?

- **Interactions:** What kinds of interactions (with each other and with the content of the community) will generate energy and engagement?
- **Collaboration:** How will community members collaborate with each other to achieve shared goals?
- **Knowledge sharing:** What external resources (Elders, knowledge keepers, publications, and the like) will support the community during its initial development? How will members share these resources and gain access to them?

Introduce the Leaders of Hosting Schools

To build participants' commitment and momentum for this CoP, introduce and invite the hosting leaders to share a few words about their school and what participants can expect to see and learn while visiting their schools.



Suggestions to set up a Community of Practice

5. Engage in Pre-visits to Hosting Schools

Once registration is completed, the facilitator should arrange to meet with each hosting school leader two to three weeks in advance of the scheduled visit to their school to discuss details of the visit. School visits are co-facilitated by the school leader(s) and the CoP facilitator. A school visit may include the following agenda items:

- Opening prayer and smudging;
- Coffee (chairs in a circle) and community building, led by an elder if possible;
- Host leader(s) presentation;
- School tour;
- Facilitated discussions;
- Reflections and implications;
- Circle sharing once again to end the session.

Suggested details related to some of the above agenda are outlined below, and should be modified to reflect local context, school leaders' comfort level, and the learning needs of the CoP members.

Host Leader's Presentation

Each school tour will include a short presentation (20-30 minutes) made by the school leader(s) and will focus on their school's "story" related to acquiring and applying Indigenous foundation knowledge. Examples of content for this presentation may include the following:

- ways the school/district began their journey in acquiring and applying Indigenous foundation knowledge, including how the school used ideas from the Supporting Awareness, Understanding and Application of Indigenous Foundational Knowledge: A

Planning and Implementation Tool to guide planning;

- ways the school/district involved Indigenous Elders in their journey;
- ways the leaders engaged teachers/staff in building their Indigenous foundational knowledge;
- connections to Competency 5 of the Leadership Quality Standard, and the Teaching Quality Standard;
- successes and challenges;
- mini-presentations by lead teachers or students;
- recommended resources;
- details related to touring of the school: what to look for as they walk through classrooms, hallways, and common learning spaces.

The presentation should provide highlights only. Further details will surface during the facilitated discussions during and following the school tour (see page 12).



Suggestions to set up a Community of Practice

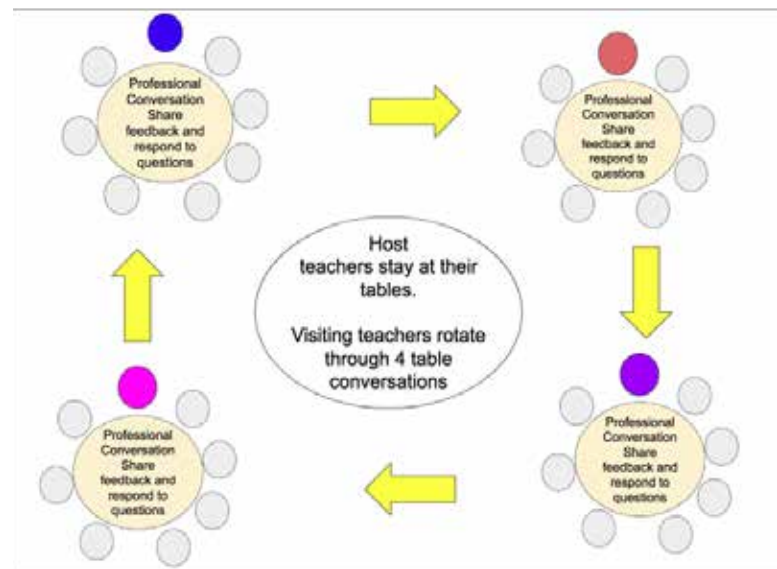
School Tour

If the CoP has more than 20 members, it is recommended to divide the group up into two or three smaller groups as members engage in the school tour. If possible, request that the hosting school identify “tour guides” to tour each small group around the school. The tour guides will be different leaders at each school. Guides may include a teacher, an assistant principal, a liaison worker, a department head or, where appropriate, a student. These leaders are identified to act as tour guides because they are leading the acquisition and application Indigenous foundational knowledge in their

school, and have taken on responsibility for a key area of the work (e.g. finding and sharing Indigenous resources; creating a place to which Indigenous students can relate; working with a local Elder; engaging the school community in understanding reconciliation). Tour guides help to create a meaningful and practical walks throughout school, being able to point out artifacts, displays, resources and the like that otherwise might not be noticed by the CoP members. The guides can also play an important role in the facilitated discussions following the tour of the school.

Facilitated Discussions

Facilitated discussions following the school tour can be structured in many different ways. It is important to provide opportunities for CoP members to engage in dialogue with the school leaders in a safe, trusting, and personal way. By keeping the groups small, each member of the CoP has the opportunity to personalize the learning for themselves, and connect what has been observed and heard to their own context. The strategy depicted in the visual below has proven to be very successful in engaging the CoP participants in personal and meaningful dialogue. In this visual, each table is facilitated by an identified school leader, and the topic would revolve around the expertise/responsibility that the leader holds in the school in relation to building Indigenous foundational knowledge.



Suggestions to set up a Community of Practice

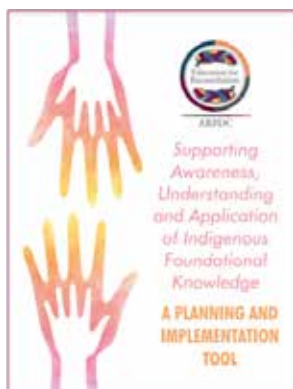
Tapping into the Expertise of the CoP

Invite one or more CoP member to provide a short update of ways in which they are using a particular strategy, process or resource to support acquiring and applying Indigenous foundational knowledge. These conversations serve as inspiration and motivation for other CoP members.

Reflection and Implications

The facilitator should ensure that there is sufficient time at the end of each school visit for the CoP participants to engage in self-reflection and identify their next steps at their own school. Prompts for reflection could include the following:

- What was a memorable moment for you?
- How might you introduce one idea in your school?
- How might others (at your own school or from this CoP) support you?



The *Supporting Awareness, Understanding and Application of Indigenous Foundational Knowledge: A PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION TOOL* offers direction and support for leaders as they plan next steps.

Administrative Details

The facilitator should ensure that the following details are discussed/confirmed with the leaders of the hosting schools:

- Confirm a meeting space for the CoP members. This space should be able to accommodate the number of participants in the group comfortably, and to allow for the grouping of chairs in a circle format to begin and end the visit.
- Confirm whether or not to offer refreshments, and if refreshments are desired, confirm who will organize this.
- Confirm if handouts need to be printed, and who will print the handouts.
- Supply honorarium (if available). Hosting schools will need to know if money is available to the school to cover refreshment costs, and substitute teacher costs (if needed), and any other expenses. Prior to meeting with hosting school leaders, the facilitator should confirm whether funds have been set aside for this purpose, and the amount of the honorarium for each school.
- Send a personal note of appreciation to the hosting leaders immediately following each school visit, thanking them for opening up their school, and sharing their wisdom. The facilitator should also ensure the honorarium (if available) is sent to the hosting school.

Suggestions to set up a Community of Practice

6. Create an Online Shared Workspace

The use of technologies can create a dedicated 24/7 online space for collaborating, discussing, archiving school visits, and sharing resources (such as Moodle, dedicated website, blog, wiki or a shared Google folder). An online shared workspace can create opportunities for open, online dialogue with one another so that participants can more fully understand the different possibilities for supporting their school community in acquiring and applying Indigenous foundational knowledge. The shared space should welcome and allow different levels of participation. Typically, there will be a core group of individuals who participate intensely through online discussions and the posting of resources/artifacts. There will also be an active group who participates regularly, but not to the same level. Finally, there may be a group of participants who take a more passive role, yet still benefit from their level of involvement.

7. Assess Impact

At the end of the final session for the school year, it is important to assess the impact of the CoP. The facilitator should collect quantitative data on the level of participation - how many people participated (both in the school visits as well as contributing to the shared workspace) and how often? This data can be collected over time and collated at the end of the year.

The facilitator should also collect qualitative data on the impact - how did their participation in the community of practice strengthen their instructional leadership to support their school community in acquiring and applying Indigenous foundational knowledge in relation to the Leadership Quality Standard?

What changed for you personally, as the instructional leaders? What changes have you observed in your school? What shifts in practice did you observe? What evidence have you collected? Gathering this data can be done through an open ended survey, one-on-one interviews, or through written conversations, as outlined below.

Written Conversations (Shhh—no talking!)

In writing, please respond to the following question:

How has this CoP strengthened your instructional leadership to support your school community in acquiring and applying Indigenous foundational knowledge in relation to the Leadership Quality Standard? Please share specific examples of evidence to support your statements.

- After two minutes of writing, pass your paper to the person to the left.
- Respond to the writing/thinking on the paper you receive.
- Pass the paper to the left.
- Repeat the process, by following the prompts, until your paper comes back to you.

Other open ended questions that could be posed include these:

- The best part of this community of practice....
- One thing I would change about this community of practice...

References and Resources

The facilitator should also strive to collect quotations, video clips, and photos of events that occurred throughout the life of the CoP. These “artifacts” provide tangible evidence of changes in practice, enhanced understandings, and degree of impact.

The facilitator may wish to invite each participant to share their unique success story with the entire group, so all may learn from each others’ experiences. This task encourages each participant to reflect more deeply on their own learning, by identifying what is working (and what isn’t), while making plans as to how they will continue to change and add to their practice in the future. To make time for sharing everyone’s stories, communities of 20 to 30 typically invite participants to prepare two or three slides for the final session, and speak to them. Creating a common slide, as well as two or three common questions for the participants to use can help to structure the stories. Slides can include photos of students/teachers at work, examples of quotations, summary statements, and observations.



8. Summary

Built on solid research and sound adult learning pedagogy, communities of practice offer a powerful professional learning strategy for learning how to strengthen instructional leadership to lead learning related to Indigenous foundational knowledge and its application in relation to the Leadership Quality Standard. This personalized approach to professional development creates robust opportunities for participation and collaboration.

9. References and Resources

Creating Communities of Practice

<http://www.communityofpractice.ca/>

Introduction to Communities of Practice

<http://wenger-trayner.com/introduction-to-communities-of-practice/>

Empowering the Spirit

<http://empoweringthespirit.ca/>

Supporting Awareness, Understanding and Application of Indigenous

Foundational Knowledge: A PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION TOOL

<http://empoweringthespirit.ca/supporting-awareness-understanding-application/>

Murray Sinclair What is Reconciliation TRC?

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=swo9flbA>





Photo credit: Aaron Davis