

Indigenous Students' Storywork: Local-to-Global Transformative Learning and Growth

Samantha Cardinal, Mount Royal University, Canada
Jacey P. Woycheshin, Mount Royal University, Canada
Jenna L. Galway, University of Alberta, Canada
Taylor R. Tsakoza, Mount Royal University, Canada
Nevada Ouellette, University of Calgary, Canada
Cheryl Barnabe, University of Calgary, Canada
Andrea Kennedy, Mount Royal University, Canada
Francine Dudoit Tagupa, Hawaiian Kupuna Honolulu, United States
Randy Bottle, Blackfoot Elder Kainaiwa First Nation, Canada
Anita Eagle Bear, Blackfoot Elder Kainaiwa First Nation, Canada

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Abstract

Storywork by four Indigenous post-secondary student mentees from Canada highlights their transformative co-learning experiences with community through a local-to-global field school. This program was funded by the Alberta Indigenous Mentorship in Health Innovation (AIM-HI) Network as a foundation for students to succeed in Indigenous health and community-based research. Mentees are undergraduate students from different post-secondary institutions/programs and various Indigenous communities including Cree, Dene and Métis. Mentors included 2 Elders (Blackfoot and Hawaiian) and professors (1 nursing and 2 medicine) from Métis, Blackfoot and hanai Hawaiian families. With respect for Indigenous oral tradition, mentees share their transformative experiences through digital storytelling. With the metaphor of plants, mentees describe their individual and collective growth from seed, to blooming and taking root with their identity. Opening hearts and minds to Indigenous ways of knowing inspired a strong cultural connection for engaging in academic studies and relational co-learning with Indigenous communities. Mentees learned relevant skills to support self-awareness/knowledge development, caregiving/self-care, compassion/self-compassion, and cultural growth through common humanity; these skills support their roles as resilient strong helpers, who are well-positioned to respectfully advance Indigenous ways of knowing in research to promote health with Indigenous Peoples. With an evolving impact beyond the duration of the field school, mentees share their learning journey and calls to action as emerging Indigenous Health Researchers.

Keywords: Indigenous Health Research, Mentorship, Transformative Learning

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Introduction

Storywork by four Indigenous Canadian post-secondary students/mentees highlights their transformative relational learning experiences with community through a local-to-global field school. We are called to begin this work with respect to our Indigenous teachings. While there is a westernized author acknowledgement at the end of this paper, we must honour our Indigenous protocols by first acknowledging the land, Elders, and our positionality in relationship to this project.

Land Acknowledgement

We humbly and respectfully acknowledge the ancestors, knowledge holders, and traditional territories where we live, work, and play. We acknowledge the Ainu and the Okinawan Indigenous Peoples of Japan where this journal is published. This acknowledgement is grounded in the United Nations Declaration of Rights for Indigenous Peoples (2007).

Elder Acknowledgement

Elders are valued for their contribution as “keepers of Indigenous Knowledge, dynamic ethical consultants, community protectors, and credible sources of information” (Flicker et al. cited by Kennedy, McGowan, & El Hussein, 2020, p. 2). With humble respect, we acknowledge the guidance and support of Hawaiian Kupuna Francine Makaona’ona Dudoit Tagupa (herein referred to as ‘Aunty Fran’) and Blackfoot Elders Randy Saa’kokoto Bottle and Anita Kakao’saki Eagle Bear. Their wisdom guides our ongoing understanding of Indigenous identity and responsibility to ourselves, family, and community.

Aunty Fran welcomed us to her Āina (land). She is Director of Native Hawaiian Healing at Waikiki Health, and is a traditional healer, nurse, and political activist who is recognized by the community given her significant support for Hawaiian culture and health. Development of this project was guided by Aunty Fran given her key role as the presiding Elder with seven previous local-to-global nursing field schools with Mount Royal University, noting years of collaboration with Canadian Indigenous Elders, knowledge holders, and agencies. Randy was the local Elder for this project given his outstanding contributions of elected representation, leadership, and support in preserving culture with Indigenous youth and communities; we are deeply grateful that Randy’s wife Elder Anita Eagle Bear accompanied him to Hawai’i and shared her traditional, cultural and spiritual teachings. Together, they helped us to understand where we are from (local) so we may learn from a broader perspective (global). Co-learning with these distinguished Elders is a precious gift and we are truly humbled and grateful for their guidance.

In consultation with Elders, their contribution is acknowledged foremost in this paper. While co-authorship of this paper is attributed to the mentees and primary faculty mentors, the contribution of Elders is recognized well beyond authorship. The importance of formally acknowledging Elders’ wisdom in the academy needs to be honoured with humility and respect to local Indigenous protocol, including consultation with the Elders on how they wish to be acknowledged (Kennedy et al., 2021).

Positionality

The student/mentee co-authors of this paper are Indigenous women from Canada who identify as Nehiyaw/Cree (Samantha and Jacey), Nehiyaw-Otipemisiwiskwew Cree/Métis (Jenna) and Dene (Taylor); this paper emphasizes storywork by these four mentees. We acknowledge the contribution of Nehiyaw-Otipemisiwiskwew Cree/Métis mentee, Nevada Ouellette, who was unable to continue with this project. Faculty/mentor co-authors are Métis (Cheryl) and Settler/Métis ancestry (Andrea), respectively from medicine and nursing disciplines; Andrea is hanai/traditionally adopted by Aunty Fran. We acknowledge the contribution of Blackfoot mentor and physician Lindsay Crowshoe. Relationality with ourselves, each other, Kupuna/Elders, mentors, the community, and all beings is of central importance to our emerging role as Indigenous Health Researchers. Relationality is a cornerstone to our process, focus, and the storywork shared in this paper.

Background

Project Overview

The Alberta Indigenous Mentorship in Health Innovation (AIM-HI) Network Local-to-Global Indigenous Service-Learning Field School was created to foster emerging Indigenous Health Research success with five Indigenous post-secondary students. The AIM-HI Network (Figure 1) is one of eight Canadian Institutes of Health Research (CIHR) funded Indigenous Mentorship Network Programs, with a mandate to support Indigenous graduate students engaged in health research. The AIM-HI Network specifically embraces an intergenerational, multi-layered, and cascading mentorship model, with a commitment to identifying supports for success and resilience of Indigenous learners and through wise mentorship practices.



Figure 1: AIM -HI logo

This specific project was inspired by AIM-HI academic mentor, Dr. Andrea Kennedy, and envisioned as a transformative learning experience incorporating personal and collaborative reflections on identity, event-based mentorship activities, and unique experiential learning in local-to-global contexts (i.e., Alberta, Canada and Hawaii, USA). Interested participants were invited to apply to the opportunity providing written materials to share more about themselves and their motivations and personal and career goals, which were explored further through virtual interviews. This project's objectives correspond to specific AIM-HI Network aims, including:

- Reorganize health research mentorship around cultural and community principles and values to address the dynamic, transactional facets of career development for Indigenous learners.
- Expand and enhance an intergenerational mentorship network among Indigenous mentees, in relation to Indigenous and non-Indigenous community and academic mentors, to build an inter-disciplinary community of practice committed to Indigenous health research.

Elder Consultation

Field school participants were selected in consultation with Aunty Fran, with a specific objective to include post-secondary learners located throughout Alberta, from diverse disciplines related to health research, and at varying levels of progress in their academic journey. Activities included virtual meetings, local (Calgary) in-person orientation weekend with ceremony, and discussions on selected literature and topics in preparation for the global (Hawaii) field school. This process helped to affirm the mentees' group identity as *`ohana* (family) to reflect their bond and connection that was developed and strengthened during this co-learning journey. In alignment with AIM-HI, the field school had five interconnected goals developed with Aunty Fran and based on Hawaiian teachings by Kupuna Pilahi Pahi:

1. Akahai -Kindness: With kindness/compassion for self and others, build capacity for Indigenous Service Learning, Community Based Research, and Indigenous Health Research.
2. Lokahi -Unity & Harmony: Respectful engagement with Indigenous Knowledges by learning with Elders and knowledge holders and weaving Indigenous Knowledges with Western Knowledge through two-eyed seeing and co-learning.
3. Olu'olu -Agreeable: As pili `ohana/close family group, learn together and engage in storywork for collective knowledge generation.
4. Ha'aha'a – Humility: Advance cultural humility (process) for cultural safety (outcome) with all peoples and communities.
5. Ahonui – Patience & Perseverance: Develop resiliency skills to support daily efforts with passion, courage, purpose, hope and excellence.

Literature Review

The Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR, 2020) acknowledges that holistic knowledge and relationality are integral to Indigenous health research. Indigenous health research methodologies are rooted in building and maintaining relationships and community collaboration (Ninomiya & Pollock, 2016, p. 34). When Indigenous health researchers are grounded in Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing, they are well positioned with the culturally appropriate means to identify and effectively address community-driven priorities and needs (Hyett et al., 2018, p. E618).

Indigenous health mentorship is vital to advance the field as there is currently disproportionate underrepresentation of trained and practicing Indigenous researchers. Approximately 13,000 health researchers are funded by the CIHR (CIHR, 2018), yet only 389 Indigenous Health researchers affiliated with a Canadian university are listed in the Indigenous Health Researchers Database (National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health [NCCIH], n.d.). This knowledge demonstrates a clear need for training and recruitment of Indigenous mentees and mentors in the field.

Blackfoot Elder Roy Bear Chief shared a wise teaching that “the responsibility of a researcher is to look-listen-learn as a lifelong journey” (Kennedy et al., 2020, p. 6). As opportunities continue to arise for Indigenous learners to participate in mentorship experiences, Indigenous Health Researchers will have the capacity to be strong-resilient helpers for their communities and beyond. With experiential knowledge “... eventually the student will discover that he or she is the possessor of a knowledge much broader, deeper, and more comprehensive than what is being taught in the classroom” (Deloria, 1999, p. 39).

This mentee-centred decolonization process within the academy is supported by transformative co-learning. We understand this relationality of mentees and knowledge development based on Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall's teachings of Etuaptmumk/two-eyed seeing teaching which encourages respectful engagement with Western and Indigenous teachings as distinct systems (Marshall, Marshall & Bartlett, 2015; Marshall, 2018). This co-learning process helps mentees to navigate the Western academy while integrating Indigenous ways of knowing in a way that respects relationality with Indigenous communities (Kennedy et al., 2021) and supports integration of heart and minds (Gehl, 2012). Intergenerational mentorship supports critical learning skills that provide opportunity for growth (Livstrom et al., 2020, p. 13); this also highlights the importance of Elders to support the mentees' learning journey (Kennedy et al., 2020; Spence et al., 2018). We extend this understanding of two-eyed seeing through transformative learning theory based on deep self-reflection to guide intentional action and critical evaluation of the co-learning process (Mezirow, 1997).

Method

Transformative learning was informed by Indigenous scholarship of storywork (Whitinui, 2014) and relationality (Deloria, 1999). The principles of storywork and relationality connects the heart, mind, body, and spirit which has kept us on the path of Indigenous education and ways of knowing (Archibald, 2008).

Storywork

Storywork by the mentees highlights interconnected goals (see Project Overview) and Indigenous ways of being, knowing and doing which includes: Indigenous mentorship, transformative learning, Indigenous research methodology, and digital storytelling. Indigenous mentorship was a primary focus throughout the project. We learned together as *ʻohana*. This created connections akin to family between the local and global Elders/Kupuna, AIM-HI mentors/Kumu, and students. Learning together was also inclusive of mentors' families and community partners. A significant part of developing mentorship relationships was respecting and honouring the vital role Elders have in guiding community engagement in relational learning (Kennedy et al., 2021). Honouring cultural protocols allowed us to foster humility, engage in transformative learning, and obtain holistic professional development. As emerging Indigenous Health Researchers, we are grateful for the privilege and gift of having many Indigenous mentors to guide and support us.

Relationality

Preparing for the project meant recognizing and identifying our own gifts that we will share with the community and each other. Literature, such as *Strong Helpers' Teachings: The Value of Indigenous Knowledges in the Helping Professions* (Baskin, 2016) and *Resilient: How to Grow an Unshakable Core of Calm, Strength and Happiness* (Hanson, 2018), informed and enhanced understanding of our resilient strong helper roles. We explored these works through online discussion boards and learned to engrain daily practice of resilience building exercises. Utilizing these practices, holistic health became foundational for preparation and encouraged integrated relationality within ourselves and among the `ohana.

Acknowledging our connections with the land, ancestral history, and identity was a part of this process. Thus, applying Indigenous research methodology of relationality was key in focusing our intention, responsibility and actions in a way that honours that we are all related (Deloria, 1999). We gained insight and deeper understanding of relationality through our shared experiences in the project. Through digital storytelling (Tsakoza et al., 2021), we honoured the gifts of those connections and relationships with an aloha circle opening and individual narratives detailing transformative learning experiences. Francis and Munson (2017) refer to “the centering of Indigenous knowledge and stories” as tribalography which is a means “... of positioning and validating Indigenous story by situating Indigenous stories as central components in a way that disrupts colonial binaries and allows for authentic dialogue and engagement” (p. 52). Sharing stories in this way, we honour and commemorate the gifts exchanged in the project by sharing the mentees’ own words.

Relational Learning with Indigenous Communities

Mentees’ evolving understanding of Indigenous service-learning shifted to relational learning with Indigenous communities; we maintained good relations with the land, the traditions, and the People by practicing “...humility, respect, honesty, and reciprocity...” (Kennedy et al., 2021, p. 1). Community partner relationships were developed over many years with Aunty Fran and mentor Andrea Kennedy through local-to-global nursing field schools (Spence et al., 2018). Honoured partners with the AIM-HI field school project include Waikiki Health (Aunty Fran, Director Native Hawaiian Healing), Prince Jonah Kuhio Elementary School (Lynn Kobayashi, Principal), Ho'oulu 'Āina- Kōkua Kalihi Valley Comprehensive Family Services (Anakala/Uncle Scotty Garlough, Youth Coordinator), Lunalilo Care Home (Mike Warren, Director of Nursing), and the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa (Dr. Mapuana Antonio, Assistant Professor- Native Hawaiian & Indigenous Health Specialization Head). The experiences and relationships from being received by these hosts in their homelands, and the co-learning that emerged from reflection of these interactions, are shared through this manuscript from the perspectives of the Indigenous mentees.

Discussion

This unique experience by the Indigenous mentees presents key themes of their individual and collective growth ; this is reflected in the plant metaphor of a tree from seed to blooming, and is introduced in our poem “Keauhou - A New Beginning” (see Figure 2):



Figure 2: Keauhou - A New Beginning; Image: GDJ, 2021

Seeds in Soil

Just as seeds are full of potential and influenced by their environment, our growth throughout this project was nurtured by our willingness to learn. While we were open to the bridging of colonial and Indigenous worldviews, our indoctrinated colonial perspectives created challenges. The uncertainty of how we would overcome the colonial narrative held us in a vulnerable holding pattern. Researcher Brené Brown (2015) articulates vulnerability not as a weakness but as a measure of courage: “vulnerability is not winning or losing; it’s having the courage to show up and be seen when we have no control over the outcome” (p. 4). Our commitment to learning how to adapt to the teachings from our Elders and practicing self-care and compassion enabled our `ohana to cultivate resilience which then led to growth. Progression during this journey was facilitated through the ongoing support of our mentors. Their guidance contributed to understanding ourselves on a deeper personal and spiritual level to embrace our identities as strong helpers and wahine/women.

Planting Roots

We started by learning from a local level. Germinating through self-discovery and resilience, we dug our roots into the earth so our presence as Indigenous women and emerging Indigenous Health Researchers could be established. Mentored by Indigenous Elders and knowledge holders, we were supported in understanding our relations to the land, self, and one another. Our firm rooting in our local identity allowed us to expand our thinking in a global context. Nourishing our identity required decolonizing our mind and embracing Indigenous ways of knowing. These roots created a strong support from which to grow. Reconciling our westernized colonial attitudes and backgrounds was a shared experience amongst our `ohana. These previous attitudes permeated our perception of research and initially hindered our ability to understand the nuances of Indigenous health research methodologies.

Sprouting/Breaking Through

We are seeds in soil that established roots in our learning experience. Steadily, our roots spread and deeply embedded our strengths in our identity as Indigenous People. Rooted firmly, we began to break through the surface. Co-learning in unison, we emerged upward as resilient strong helpers, supported by our core: relationality. From this, our connections and relationships branch out. Each branch represents our interconnectedness to the land that we walk on, to the land we visit, to the community, and to Indigenous knowledge keepers. We are connected to each other. Everything is connected.

Budding and Blooming

Nurtured by our mentors' guidance, we break through the surface. We are individuals, deeply connected as an *`ohana*. We are rooted and grow in the same soil. Much like how trees share nutrients in a root system, we too nurture and help each other grow through co-learning. We sprout and emerge as new growth, supported at the core by relationality. Connection and relationality form the basis from which we branch. Branching from the centre are relationships: with ourselves, the land, community, and Indigenous knowledge holders. Our branches support our growth from which our budding knowledge is shared.

As we grow and mature, our foliage develops. Each bud represents our profound learning achievements. Like a tree trunk, we endured weathering but we are stronger and adaptive as a result. In the process of transformative learning, our kuleana (responsibility and privilege) is to bloom but also share the beauty of our knowledge to advance and empower the next generation. Plants need continual care or they will wither. We continue to thrive through reciprocity, we will share our knowledge, and show up as strong resilient helpers. Caregiving is our kuleana for our future generations. Our mentors supported us, now we must take what we learned to hold this sacred space for future generations and nurture them to grow strong. Co-learning cultural information with Elders and knowledge holders is shown in this map (see Figure 3) as collaborative and reciprocal; this highlights the centrality of relationship with our selves, each other, the land, and community.

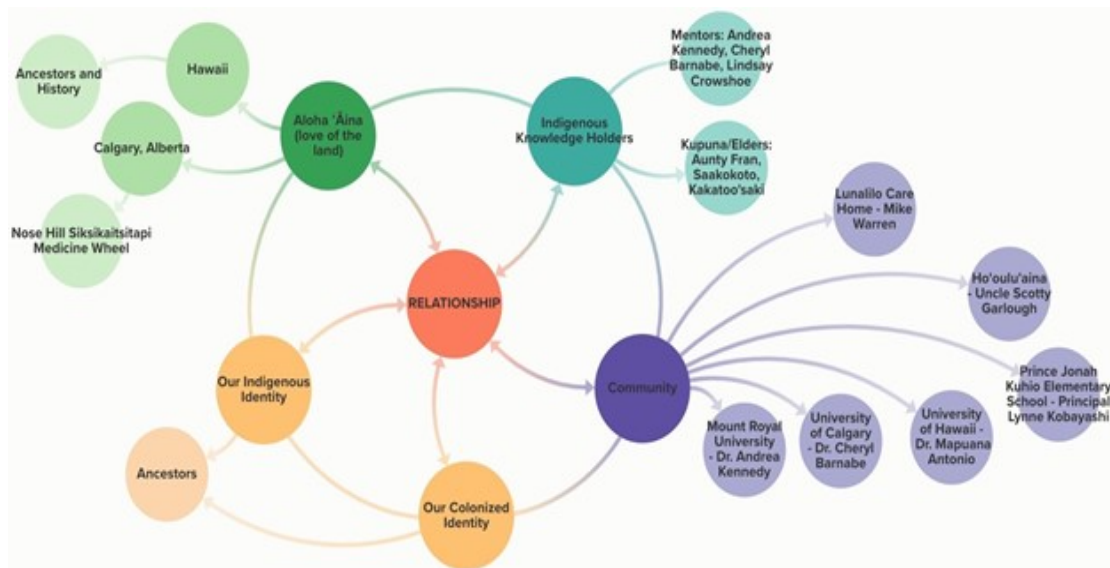


Figure 3: Relationality

Conclusion: Moving Forward

Each lesson gifted by the Elders, mentors, the land, and community members was learned in unison by the `ohana mentees. Words spoken by the Elders echoed resonance; different facets of the land illuminated, and our spirits became interconnected through Indigenous community interactions. While we experienced this project together as a collective, we each received lessons to guide our inward journey. Our eyes viewed the beauty in our lessons, surroundings and memories that evoked Indigenous ways of knowing; this connection of our heart and mind journeys (Gehl, 2012) honoured the Elders' teachings in ways that unfolded individual lessons to foster personal, academic, and cultural growth; our hearts opened in varying depths. Learning was experiential, in direct connection, in response and reflection with the immediate and holistic ecosystem (Battiste, 2013). An important part of this project focused on introspection to aid our `ohana in strengthening and discovering the gifts passed down from our ancestors (Bourque Bearskin et al., 2021). Deeper knowing of ourselves and the development of inner strengths humbly led us to acknowledging key lessons (see Figure 4) and responsibility in honouring the Indigenous value of relationality (Bourque Bearskin et al., 2021).



Figure 4: Key Lessons from `Ohana Student Mentees; Image: GDJ, 2021

The gifts we hold are not meant to hide away beneath fear and uncertainty, but instead are meant to be shared as strong helpers. We practiced our gifts by using them to support one another as each of us navigated through a new way of knowing; we strived to use our experiences to build resilience. Through two-eyed seeing (Marshall, Marshall & Bartlett, 2015; Marshall, 2018), we learned how to honour both Western and Indigenous ways of knowing as important lessons gifted to the *`ohana*. Our colonized worldview had to be acknowledged to nurture, decolonize, and discover the potential of our Indigenous ways of knowing (Battiste, 2013; Bourque Bearskin et al., 2021). While we are challenged in this process, rather than moving forward with anger, our decolonial actions are grounded in love/aloha and gentleness as we connect our heart and mind journey (Gehl, 2012). To mobilize relationality, connection, and community, it is prudent to passionately learn, honour, and respect all parts of our selves and acknowledge the co-learning responsibility of two-eyed seeing (Marshall, 2018). Just as we brought together our different lessons, we must bring together our different ways of knowing into action in harmony with Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples as a decolonial effort for the good of all people (Kennedy et al., 2021). *All my relations*.

Authors' Note

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Contact email: akennedy@mtroyal.ca