The Role of Relationships in Indigenous Community-Engaged Learning

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Abstract

Service Learning is the pursuit of education while serving the interests of the community and undertaking a direct role in social change (Phillips, 2013). It allows students a chance to develop research skills while simultaneously building bonds with colleagues and creating relationships within communities. We are two undergraduate students, from a collaborative group of five, who undertook a month-long summer Scholars in Residence (SiR) program at the University of Toronto Mississauga. Our involvement with the SiR project, "Community-engaged Learning with the Indigenous Action Group (IAG)" immersed us in a grassroots effort to research the impacts of a community-engaged learning course at the student level. The goal of the course, "Anthropology and Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island" (ANT241H) is to initiate and maintain an Indigenous curriculum in a university setting. Self-reflection is pivotal in our research skill development and our understanding of the impact of the project in its initial stages. Qualitative analysis of student assignments demonstrated the importance of creating relationships with Indigenous Scholars to advance Indigenous Pedagogy and provide students with the tools needed to build relationships with the local Indigenous community. Our own relationships with the Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation (MCFN) was limited to remote learning by COVID-19 pandemic restrictions. Within this context, it is integral to the longevity of this project that we adapt to the virtual modality of learning necessary for the continuation of this course. Despite the hindrances to our relationship building, the SiR experience transcended our interpersonal needs as allies and laid the foundation for a stronger bond as we progress in the longitudinal study.

The IAG Initiative within SiR

Our journey into Service Learning or Community-engaged Learning was initiated by an invitation to apply to the Jackman's Scholars in Residence program (SiR) at the University of Toronto in Canada. SiR is an immersive research program in which selected undergraduate students live and work together in collaborative groups as research assistants (RAs) at one of the three University of Toronto campuses. Each SiR research group is guided under the supervision of a faculty member, in a month-long summer research project where the completed work is presented to colleagues at a colloquium. The research project we applied to, "Community-engaged Learning with the Indigenous Action Group", was at the Mississauga Campus. The Project is part of a three-year longitudinal study of the course, "Anthropology and Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island" (ANT241H) funded by the Connaught Community Partnership

Research Program. This project is approved by the Research Ethics Board Tri-Council Agency (REB# 00038121).

The Indigenous Action Group (IAG), which facilitates ANT241H and runs the research project we participated in, includes nine members from Mississaugas of the Credit First Nation (MCFN) and two non-Indigenous professors from UTM. The IAG was formed with the goal of making UTM a more accessible space for Indigenous students, as well as introducing a wide range of students to the Indigenous land-based pedagogy of the territories upon which the campus sits. Our role as RAs was to measure the impact of ANT241H by analyzing the qualitative data from the initial semester of the course. Originally, we were supposed to go to the MCFN reserve and work collaboratively with the IAG members at multiple points during this project. However, since our research was conducted during the COVID-19 pandemic restrictions, our ability to meaningfully connect and build relationships with MCFN and the IAG was altered. Instead, we worked mostly (albeit remotely) with the UTM professors, who would invite MCFN IAG members to our online sessions as guest speakers.

(De)Colonization on Campus in a Canadian Context

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) 94 Calls to Action are a response to Canada's genocidal colonial history. This document outlines needs to be met by the colonial government to begin reconciliation, such as Call to Action #65 in education, "We call upon the federal government...in collaboration with Aboriginal peoples, post-secondary institutions and educators, to establish a national research program with multi-year funding to advance understanding of reconciliation" (TRC, 2015). The University of Toronto Steering Committee's response document, Answering the Call: Wecheehetowin, calls upon the University to establish meaningful relationships, with Indigenous people at the centre of decision making (UofT Steering Committee, 2017). The IAG was formed in response to the Calls to Action involving education to reimagine Indigenous teaching at UTM.

It is important to note, however, that the University of Toronto was not a blank slate in terms of de-colonial projects. The St. George Campus offers Indigenous academic services and cultural immersion opportunities. First Nations House (FNH) at St. George (2020) was established to provide a cultural space with services for First Nations, Metis, and Inuit students from community Elders. The campus hosts an Indigenous Studies Students Union (ISSU, 2020), led by students enrolled in Indigenous Studies engaged with this effort. At the Mississauga campus, in comparison, there are no Indigenous Studies programs. The UTM Indigenous Centre, with only two staff, focuses on cultural advocacy and the provision of cultural competency training for non-Indigenous faculty and students. The Maanjiwe Nendamowinan Building, which means 'gathering of minds' in Anishinaabemowin, was opened at UTM in 2019. The MCFN named this building to acknowledge that the campus sits on their traditional territories (see http://mncfn.ca/).

As St. George students participating in this SiR project at UTM, we became aware of the ongoing inequities as colonial hierarchical structures permeate all frameworks of learning. During the SiR colloquium we observed the stark difference between our project rooted in relationship building and advocacy, compared to the other more 'standard' research projects. Despite the presence of Indigenous peoples and programs, academia is still dominated by Western pedagogy, and Indigenous student visibility remains low due to a lack of social spaces

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and funding for support services and research. The IAG's intervention, therefore, is a novel collaboration to which we participated during its early years, especially as this relationship was not initially supported by UTM. Although the Answering the Call: Weecheehetowin (UofT Steering Committee, 2017) announced the University's commitment to addressing the TRC's Calls to Action (2015), the appropriate time and resources have not been allocated to building a strong relationship with the MCFN. For example, the University has failed to establish a permanent source of funding for the course. This Indigenous-led course requires more funding to cover costs such as trips to the MCFN Reserve, honorariums for guest speakers, talking circles, transportation, annual Powwows, and research.

The impact of ANT241H is being analyzed through a longitudinal mixed-method research study examining how local Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy affect undergraduate attitudes and previous learning. NVivo software is used to conduct the qualitative analysis of student interviews, course reflections, and assignments. The quantitative analysis of pre and post-course surveys will be completed over the next three years.

Individual Reflections on Relationships & Research

Erica de Souza

My educational background is in Childhood Development as an Early Childhood Educator (RECE), and my current study is in Indigenous Studies and Anthropology. The Indigenous Studies Program at the St. George Campus has educated me on the continued colonization of Indigenous Peoples, and my own position as a non-Indigenous person. My motivation in this project stems from this personal responsibility as a settler, to help maintain spaces for Indigeneity amidst the ongoing Indigenous cultural erasure in Canada.

I applied to this project with the expectation that the Indigenous Studies Program was accessible to all students across all three campuses. This assumption was incorrect, singularly conceptualized by the high expectations I set for post-secondary institutions. I inquired as to the reasoning behind the focus of an Indigenous Studies Program in a single location. The answer was related to the availability of instructors, and finances. Though some availability is better than none, the lack of an Indigenous curriculum is not ideal as it creates inequity of knowledge and resources in Indigenous education. Settlers are graduating without ever understanding their responsibility to upholding Treaties or the privileges granted to them. Teachings with Indigenous Knowledge Keepers and Elders become special events, instead of normalizing Indigenous pedagogy in all curriculum areas. The impact of being in service to the project and IAG became much clearer with this realization.

As our research occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, the project was made accessible online only, instead of living on campus. It was disappointing to not be able to visit the MCFN Reserve or meet Indigenous IAG members in person. We communicated via online zoom calls, through our main communication with UTM Professors Fukuzawa and Laliberte. Our conversations with the IAG were hindered by this inaccessibility, as conversations were now interview-based, we were unable to engage in informal conversation to build strong relationships.

In our efforts to build relationships with the MCFN, it is paramount to engage members with respect and understanding for their collective culture, beliefs, and relationships to land. It

was through establishing a new relationship after a long history of disrespect that this course now exists. Building bonds of trust is entirely personal, emotional, and subjective, but when we introduced ourselves, we could only give a short introduction reiterating our commitment. Communicating with my fellow SiR team members was similarly superficial as our online introductions only outlined our positionality. We did not get to know each other well enough through candid conversations to have a solid foundation. We were strangers with a common goal.

Although the interviews lacked familiarity and relationship building components, they were necessary for the project. Qualitative data analysis depended on our understanding of the student's concepts mentioned in their assignments. Some of these references I had not heard before, as Indigenous knowledge is not homogeneous. UTM Professor Laliberte was able to fill many informational gaps, and fellow team members contributed from their own specializations. Though limited, the bonds I formed with colleagues were built on trust and I depended on them when necessary.

I was most cognizant of the impact of this service-learning when performing qualitative analysis with the Nvivo 12 software. As we tracked how students incorporated knowledge through assignments their depth of integration was revealed as well, (coded deep, superficial, unclear, or none). Analysis delved into student relational concepts by coding the nuances in the dialogue, examples such as implicit bias, and cognitive dissonance. Though data varied as students' experience are coloured by personal background, I was left with the impression that non-Indigenous students were beginning to positively integrate Indigenous pedagogy into their schemas and develop empathy for Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island. This research allowed me to witness the personal impacts of a course on a community level.

Shantel Watson

My commitment to Indigenous human rights education in public schools led me to this project. It was through my involvement in high school with an art-based initiative that focused on gender-based violence against Indigenous women and members of the queer community that I immersed myself in self-education on Indigeneity. This led to an exploration of Indigenous literature through regular visits to First Nations House on the St. George campus. Through my relationships with the Indigenous educators at First Nations House, I refined my understanding of how colonial legacies influence the University's relationship with Indigenous learning. Furthermore, I began to think critically about the role of education at a secondary and post-secondary level in reconciliation. The IAG's work will help to fill in this gap; therefore, I was drawn to apply to be an RA for this project.

Due to the timeline restrictions of the SiR program and self-isolation orders, the process of relationship building with the MCFN was expedited. As a non-Indigenous person, I aspire to work in an ally capacity; however, I struggled with the fact that members of the MCFN placed trust in me before I had the chance to earn it. Councillor Veronica King-Jamieson welcomed us into the IAG sharing with us her family and lineage. Personal and group communications with members of the IAG demonstrated interest in learning about our heritage and positionality. I was never made to feel as if my intentions were being evaluated. Had I been in Councillor Jamieson's position I would have been compelled to be more reserved in my approach as a result of my own personal experiences as a black female. Interviewees were forthcoming and transparent which improved the quality of both our research and our experiences within SiR. My main

concern: Would I ever have the opportunity to demonstrate my genuine concern for Indigenous education?

This experience challenged me to reflect critically on my positionality. Although I am a woman of colour, as an immigrant, I am still a settler. I must recognize the privileges which accompany my social status while acknowledging the intersection of our experiences with systemic oppression. This truth must be accepted to avoid engaging in "oppression olympics," or a superiority complex. Navigating these complexities was essential within my role as a researcher as well as building a healthy relationship with members of the MCFN.

Nevertheless, there were moments of reciprocation which demonstrated our dual commitment to building a meaningful relationship. Councillor Veronica King Jamieson and Councillor Cathie Jamieson from the MCFN remained enthusiastic about assisting us in our research. We reached out to both Councillors to join us in the colloquium to acknowledge the Mississauga territory and their role at UTM, during which they actively participated. Our unification around a central goal allowed us to transcend our mutual unfamiliarity.

I credit this service-learning experience for allowing me to acquire new research skills through practice as opposed to instruction. The greatest barrier which I faced was my unfamiliarity with the discipline of anthropology. I study International Relations and minor in two foreign languages. NVivo coding required us to apply psychological and anthropological linguistics analysis. My field of study is concerned with ideologies and institutions, not individuals, and their motives. However, my academic background contributed to my understanding of how Western institutions impose barriers that prevent the acceptance of Indigenous pedagogy in academia. My colleagues were more astute in this area of knowledge. Aside from Indigenous Studies, they have academic backgrounds in anthropology, psychology, and professional community engagement. Their partnership was beneficial to my skill development as a researcher.

Student Experiences in ANT241H

Our preliminary qualitative data analysis (N=73 students) revealed students' appreciation for traditional methods of teaching in Anishinaabe culture. This course sometimes allowed for students to engage in a teaching circle which promoted the open exchange of ideas. As a form of experiential learning, ANT241H classes also incorporated outdoor excursions. Students found the knowledge to be more accessible after hearing first-hand experience from Indigenous scholars and community members. One student commented,

> "[this] learning provided me [with] a better and deeper understanding of the realities through the eyes of the Indigenous people living them, whereas before I had this knowledge purely through textbook and removed sources. Seeing, listening, and talking to the people with a direct connection to the topics being discussed helped me to learn."

Students had vivid memories of the experiences shared with them through storytelling models and were able to engage from their individual positionality.

Some students did struggle with this knowledge integration as the learning of Indigenous pedagogy is simultaneously the unlearning of many Western ideals such as individualism and ownership. Many students demonstrated easier integration by employing the concept known as

Two-eyed seeing coined by Mi'kmaw Elder Albert Marshall. It is with respect for both knowledge systems that they can co-exist in ways of knowing and living. Learning about two-eyed seeing is a step towards decolonizing our minds and our societies. (Bartlett, Marshall & Marshall, 2012). A student reflected on the societal impact of two-eyed seeing from their own experience, "I have a deepened understanding of the Indigenous "eye" and that helps me see how the westernized world view and the indigenized world view work together to create a more sustainable world." ANT241H applied a holistic approach to learning, providing students with the opportunity to incorporate both educational platforms for the benefit of their growth. Student empathy was the contributing factor to understanding their relationships to course material and their role as a settler on Indigenous territory.

Recommendations for the Future

Although relationship-building efforts have been and will continue to be impacted by the pandemic, reconciliation cannot seize in the face of unforeseen circumstances. The current funding model means that the temporary discontinuation of the IAG's efforts could place the future of ANT241H in jeopardy. Although moving the course and the research project online will reduce the length of interactions between members of the MCFN community, students, and faculty as well as impede with land-based methods of learning, virtual spaces can be used to create more meaningful interactions through live lectures and discussions as well as incorporating traditional aspects through innovative uses of the technology at hand. Online learning can make these opportunities more accessible to students who face barriers related to long-distance travel and removes the hierarchy that is reinforced by physical structures of the lecture hall. The global pandemic situation has demonstrated that in times of crisis, there is a need for increased support and connectivity in all relations.

Conclusion: Setting a Precedent

The importance of relationships in our role to the IAG and MCFN community was based on understanding our own positionality as settlers. We wanted to be of service by Indigenizing institutionalized spaces, in support of decolonization efforts. The building of relationships between colleagues, MCFN members, and non-Indigenous IAG members, was a slow process and continues because of the impersonal nature of remote communication. However, this experience has demonstrated to us the critical role of grassroots mobilization in fulfilling the mandate of the IAG. While we developed skills for coding, as a small role in the longitudinal study, we take pride in understanding the impacts of ANT241H and being involved in social change.

Our initial research results from this semester indicated that while this course establishes an improved relationship between the University and MCFN, the colonial structures and attitudes of the University create intentional gaps in its capacity to meet the standards articulated in Wecheehetowin (Steering Committee for the University of Toronto, 2017). ANT241H as a grassroots movement sets the precedent of how we wish the Institution to evolve. Decolonizing our minds remains an underlying issue if students struggle to consolidate both the Western and Indigenous approaches to learning, which is imperative to initiate relationship building. We will

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continue to monitor this process of individual growth throughout the next three
years.

Acknowledgements

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