

Respectful Research: A Reflection and Insights from One Perspective of the Ongoing Journey of Research with Indigenous Communities

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Abstract: This paper is the sharing of my story: a story that comes from what I saw, what I did, and what I know made a difference in a variety of Indigenous communities in Canada and Australia. My story may not be applicable everywhere, but perhaps you will find yourself thinking about and measuring its relevance whether you are an Indigenous researcher learning from outside your own community or a non-Indigenous researcher working with Indigenous communities. This paper reflects on the ongoing journey of an academic's work with Indigenous communities and reminds us of the importance of careful focus on being culturally sensitive and respectful of the opportunities shared with us. It also recommends that academics introspectively examine the drive of their research projects that, in some cases, continue to be controversial for these communities.

Keywords: Indigenous communities, Indigenous knowledge, research, respect

Introduction

In 1916, American poet Robert Frost wrote a poem called "The Road Not Taken." The last few lines are particularly poignant to me: "Two roads diverged in a wood, and I / I took the one less traveled by, / And that has made all the difference" (p. 30). While there is some controversy about the true meaning that Frost was trying to convey, to me it was always clear—taking risks makes life more worthwhile. I have lived with this poem echoing in my mind and, amongst other amazing adventures, have traveled and lived in remote and isolated Indigenous communities, both in Canada and Australia, learning, teaching, and experiencing life.

I recently watched an interesting talk in which a qualitative researcher called herself a *storyteller* and described qualitative data as *data with a soul* (Brown, 2010). I found myself relating to this at a deep level and believe that it is important to provide an overview of my experiences so as to add value, depth, and meaning to this paper and for you, as the reader.

As a child in primary school, about age 10, I had to write about my heritage. Seeing that I had a Canadian father and a Dutch mother (how very boring, I thought!), I asked my father if he could tell me something about myself that I did not already know. He said, "Didn't you know that your great-great-great-great-great-grandfather was Old Chief Lone Cloud of the Mi'Kmaq Tribe and that you are actually an Indian princess?!?" Of course, I was thrilled beyond comparison at this news and, upon returning to school, I insisted that my friends bow to me because of my newly bestowed "royalty"... which led to my first (and only) visit to the principal's office. While this is a story that has been shared many times, I did not realize how my life path would pull me back to tell this story over and over again.

I have always felt destined to work with Indigenous people, communities, and their children, and to help others understand the strengths that lie within these communities. I am very passionate about this work. After graduating as a primary school teacher from the University of Wollongong in New South Wales, Australia, I traveled back to Canada and started my work in remote and isolated communities in Canada's north. I spent some time in a Cree community called Fort Severn (located as far north as possible in the province of Ontario) and there I taught a Grade 3/Grade 4 composite class. The following year (that not being far enough north), I ended up in the Northwest Territories working in a Dene community called Tulita. This amazingly beautiful place comes equipped with tundra, ice roads, the northern lights, and, most of all, culture... rich, deep, meaningful culture, traditions, and language, which the people there are fighting to keep alive with every precious word spoken. After a number of years close to the Arctic Circle, the pattern of *Northern Exposure* continued when I relocated to Northern Ontario, Canada and spent many years working in the adult literacy field and traveling to 18 of the 26 Ojibway, OjiCree, and Cree communities of Ontario's north. This work focused on adult literacy and building an online, live-time literacy support network for Indigenous adults in remote and isolated communities who wanted to improve their literacy skills in preparation for college or to help their children with homework, for example. As a result of these efforts, I was honored to be awarded the Province of Ontario's Council of the Federation of Literacy Award for Innovation in Literacy in 2007 and met the Premier of the province at that time to discuss the literacy issues and possibilities for these communities and their inhabitants. This work also provided opportunities to travel both nationally and abroad as an invited speaker, workshop leader, and conference presenter to share the methodology and successful results of the program. At one such conference, in San Francisco, USA, I met a woman from the Digital Bridge Unit in South Australia. She showed great interest in the work that I was doing in Canada and invited me to visit the communities where she worked should I "ever find myself in Australia." During her presentation, she showed a slide of a red dirt road that wended far into the distance. The title on the slide said, "Learning in Australia's Outback." I felt the photograph to be strangely familiar to me and it wasn't until weeks later when I was sorting through my own snapshot collections that I realized I had taken a photo very similar to hers, the difference being that my photo portrayed a long, barren road carved into the ice and snow, also traversing far into the distance. It was my equivalent experience, which I could have entitled "Learning in Canada's Outback."

Later that same year, I was awarded an international scholarship from the University of Wollongong in New South Wales, Australia. In all honesty, this felt like winning the lottery, not only because my tuition and accommodations were paid for during my studies, but mainly because I was the first in my family to attend a tertiary institution and now had the opportunity to return to embark on a PhD. I did not hesitate once I arrived in Australia to seek out the invitation to visit South Australia and, as a result, my "San Francisco connection" led me to visit three distinct remote and rural Indigenous communities, all showing interest in my research. Each of the communities was so welcoming and unique that I found myself on the phone with a friend, perplexed as to which community I should work with for my study. My friend asked, "What is happening around you right at this very minute?" I was standing at the end of a pier looking over the ocean at Port Victoria when a dolphin jumped out of the water right in front of me. "If dancing dolphins aren't a sign, I am not sure what is," my friend exclaimed, and so (as seen in Figure 1), my PhD study took place in the Narunggan community of Point Pearce in

South Australia. Just like my experiences in Canada's north, once again a learning curve of acceptance had to be traversed before the research could be completed, and many lessons were acquired along the way.

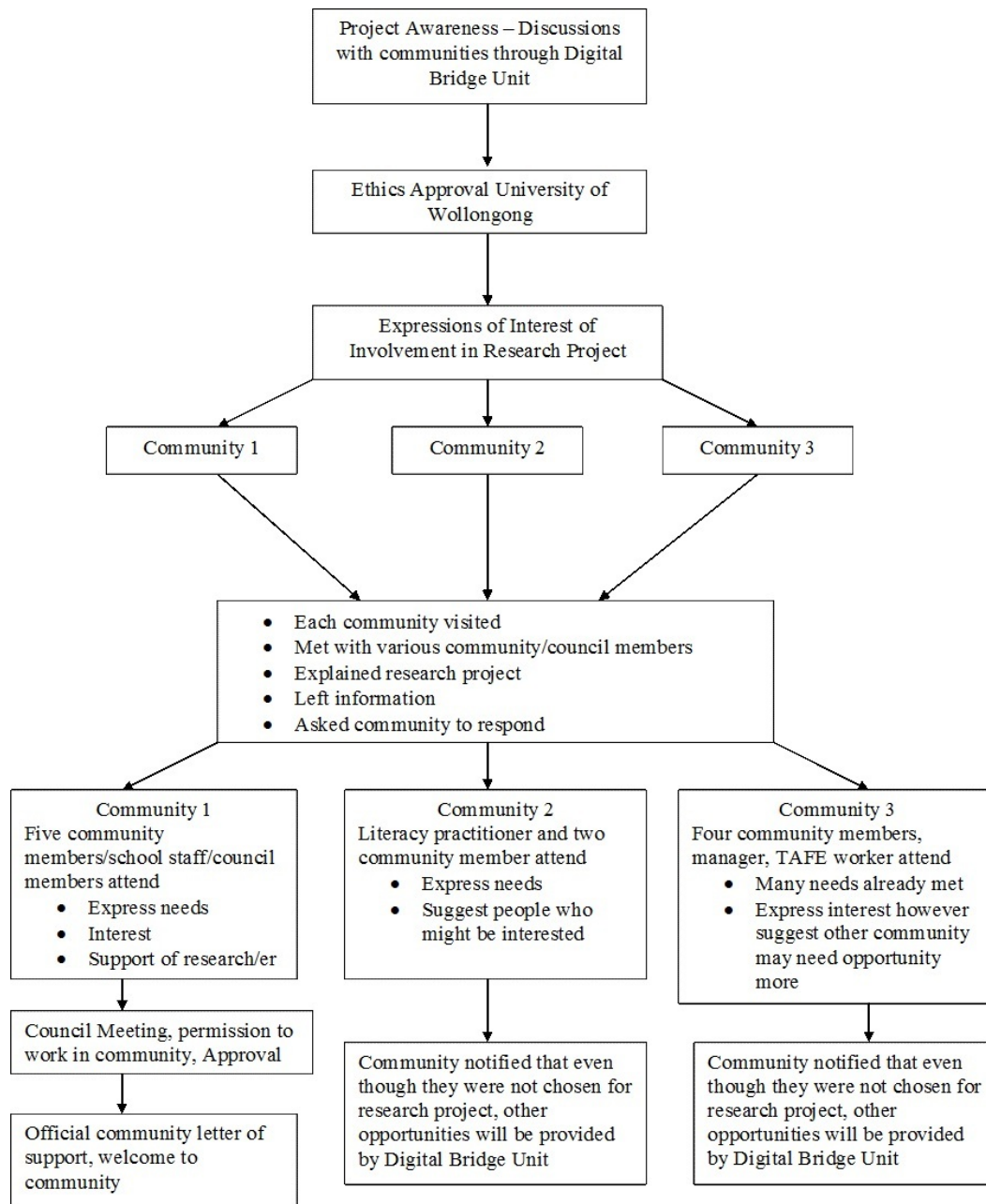


Figure 1. Sampling strategy for this research project.

It was around this time that I did some navigation of my own ancestry, only to find that my great-great-grandmother, Clara Jack, was a Mi'Kmaq woman whose family was part of a much broader Mi'Kmaq collective that lived in the area (off-reserve) in Sherbrooke, Nova Scotia, Canada. This information provided some connection for me between my father's story of my childhood and my passion for working together with Indigenous communities. As a researcher, it was important for me to think about my particular place and the lens through which I view my

work with Indigenous communities. The research space can be seen as a power relationship, and I felt it important to know my connection and my place in the contexts that I was exploring.

I have always considered my approval from these communities and community members as a precious gift. I have never taken my opportunities to work together with them for granted. It is in my years in these remote and isolated places with Indigenous people, First People of the land, that I began to truly understand the importance of preserving and protecting culture, stories, and ways of knowing and teaching. These experiences have heightened my awareness of the sensitivity of sharing this sacred and timeless information with others (Eady, 2012).

Let me explain it this way. For Indigenous people, when an Elder (a respected senior person) of a community passes away, the tears shed are not just for that person as they were in body, whether that be as a mother, grandmother, or sister, or for their role as a community leader, teacher, artist, or hunter and gatherer. The most devastating part of losing that person is the knowledge that is lost with them. An Elder is seen as an entity that embodies a wealth of intellectual, spiritual, and traditional knowledge and keeps it safe. Until recently, this knowledge has often not been video or audio recorded, written down, or practiced by others. This is not due to the Elder's lack of trying, but rather the dwindling opportunities to preserve culture, as the concept of survival in the 21st century leaves little option but a disconnect from country. Unfortunately, it is the generation in the middle—the parents of the youth and the children of the Elders—who seem to feel the pain the most. It is for these reasons—the importance of their culture, their heritage, and the very knowledge that makes them who they are—that these First People of the land protect their traditional knowledge and ways of knowing with such fervor.

For too many of these communities, researchers have effectively parachuted onto their land and conducted a “study” that has resulted in a news report or article leading to an overarching message of negativity and shame for the community. Drew (2006) describes this with eloquence and calls it “The Seagull Imperative” in an article worth the read. If you have ever been around seagulls, you will understand how quickly they can arrive, make a mess, and leave just as fast. Unfortunately, this can also happen with researchers coming into Indigenous societies. As a result, many communities are cautious, resistant, and even unwilling to meet with researchers in an attempt to preserve their Indigenous knowledge and protect their communities and their people. My research was about working collaboratively with the community to share their strengths and about determining what approach to learning would effectively build on those strengths. However, along the journey of the project, it became evident that the way I approach the research I do with Indigenous communities is just as important, if not more important, than the research itself.

Key Concepts to Consider when Researching with Indigenous Communities

Relationships

While I believe that many principles are important for successful research, I am especially fond of the following word: relationship. In all of the time I have spent as an outsider in Indigenous communities, the one thing that I felt was vital to successful research was building meaningful

and reciprocal relationships.

For me, this was about my responsibility to show the community that I am interested in their daily life and have the time to learn, participate, and share of myself—and in return, the rewards were tenfold, repaid in a lifetime of acceptance and kinship and an adoption of body and spirit. In the Arctic, there were many instances where I was given the opportunity to foster relationships and connection. During my stay, I was shown traditional dancing, invited to partake in preparing meat, and taught how to bead traditional clothing. By “sticking my neck out” and showing that I wasn’t afraid to try, in return, I may have been laughed at a bit, but I was also respected and perhaps even won a singing contest or two during festival weeks. Thank you, John Denver!

I can remember at one of the community events, one contest was to see which team of two could boil water and prepare a cup of tea from scratch in the fastest time. I singled out my fellow outsider Ben, who was in town working on a caribou study. “We can do this!” I foolishly encouraged, and with a “three, two, one, go!” we were off. It didn’t take long to see that I had been very naïve. We had chosen the greenest twigs imaginable to build a little teepee to start the task and we were still trying to get the fire going when our competitors down the line already had their water starting to simmer. In the end, it was Ben and me against the world, as all the other groups were already sipping their tea. A large group of locals encircled us, and we were blowing into our little fire encouraging it to grow and trying with all of our might to get that little pot of water boiled. The locals were having a great time pointing and laughing and, to be honest, so were we—but then, the greatest thing happened. As we put the tea into the boiling water to steep, Maurice, a very well-respected community Elder, walked towards the crowd. Then, in the same fashion as the biblical Red Sea parting at Moses’ command, the crowd stepped back to make a clear path for him to approach us. He steadily walked, crunching in the snow, until he reached our pathetic fire and said in his deep voice and heavy accent of Slavey (the mother language of the Dene people), “Serve me tea.” The crowd waited in anticipation as my hand shook, more from nerves than from the cold, as I poured the old man a cup of tea. He took it, brought the steaming mug to his frost-callused lips, and with all eyes on him he declared, “It is good!” and the gathering instantaneously erupted into thunderous applause and cheers. Honestly, this was one of the best feelings I have ever had, and the rest of the weekend we jigged to the fiddler late into the night and felt more accepted into the community than ever before. All of this because we took a risk, made an effort, and weren’t afraid to fail.

From this point on, it was clear that I was accepted into the community. Yes, I was there to teach the children, but I also attended funerals, went fishing, helped at feasts, and played bingo. In fact, over a decade later, I received an invitation to be the guest speaker at the high school graduation of my first kindergarten class in that same Arctic community: an honor not to be taken lightly, and a memory that I will cherish forever.

Permission

Once I had the opportunity to study in Australia and was preparing my proposal and ethics review, I sought out the Indigenous representative on the ethics committee at the university. It

was important to me to form a connection with this person so that she could learn who I was, the experience I had in working with Indigenous communities, where I came from, and how my work with Indigenous communities would be used for the good of the people in those communities. I felt it was my responsibility as a researcher—and as a people person—to connect with the Indigenous representative on the ethics committee, and I asked for her guidance and support. This was a positive step forward in all the research I conducted with communities and something that I continue to do with every study that I lead. To me, it is a sign of respect and a courteous gesture to ask for guidance from the respected Elder on the ethics committee. This person was a trusted member of the Indigenous community, who likely would have taken the request to be on that committee to other Elders for guidance on her decision to accept. I have made it my practice to always meet with, share with, and actively listen to the Indigenous representative on the ethics committee.

The importance of taking great care in ensuring that I have permission and that I am welcomed into a community, and to treat that as a privilege and with great respect, cannot be stressed enough. In most cases, the community councils treat requests from researchers as agenda items for their community meetings. The question of the researcher's presence in the community is put on the table and the letters from the researcher and their intended research plan, as well as ethics, are discussed. Depending on that meeting's outcome, a researcher can then be welcomed into the community, and this will be advised by the head of the council.

I have found that when I first embark on research projects with Indigenous communities, it has been very helpful to ask a respected community Elder to escort me around the community and introduce me to key community members. Impromptu meetings have been most effective when they take place in busy local venues, such as the medical building while community members are lined up for the doctor, the school, or the TAFE (community college), and may even include knocking on other Elders' doors to see if they have time for tea.

In the case of one of my projects, I started this process with a request for a meeting with the community council members in my efforts to gain support. During this meeting, I explained the purpose of the research project and explained how this could only be done with the help of the community. The council was very supportive, with one man saying, "I think that this is a great idea for our people; to give them the opportunity to learn like this is important." Two other council representatives, who were women, sat on the other side of the table and whispered to one another for a bit, then nodded their heads in approval. One said, "You have our full support." The council members were asked to spread the word around about the first focus group and perhaps suggest to some people who they think would be good additions to the group. The council also asked me to draft a letter that they could all sign to show support for the project.

After the council meeting, council members helped me to hang up signs around the town. I created posters with information about the project I was going to do, advertising the focus group and welcoming anyone to join. The community members were asked to volunteer their time for a period of two months, during which time they had the opportunity to work together to create a meaningful literacy experience and learn to use a synchronous online platform, which was available for their community to use. All community focus group and council members received

a copy of the community members' participant information sheet, which I read aloud with the group. All the community focus group members and council members signed the community member participation consent form. Figure 2 below depicts the strategy for the recruitment of volunteer community members.

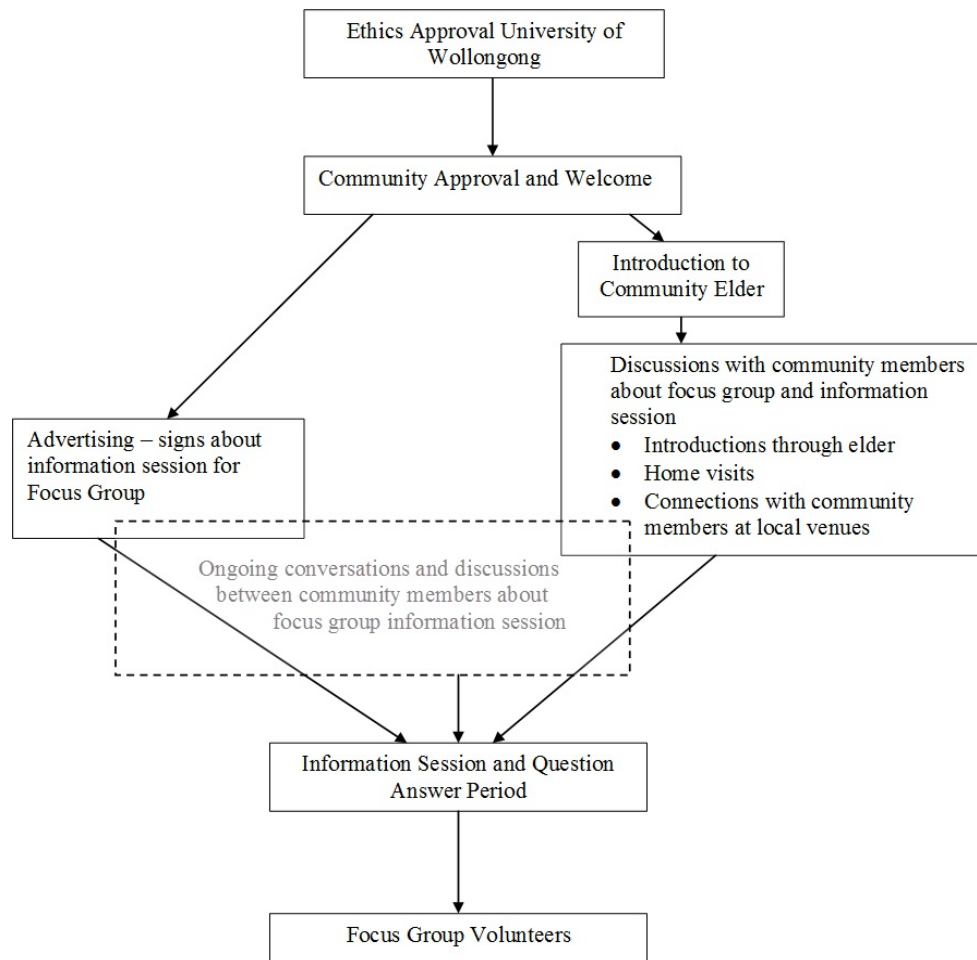


Figure 2. Recruitment in Indigenous community.

Compliance and Understanding

It is ethical practice that all of the participants involved in a study are informed of matters of the study prior to the research taking place. Therefore, I took extra precautions in reading the information letter and consent forms aloud with the participant volunteers, defining any academic terminology or unfamiliar words, and answering any questions that the participants might have. Another approach is to ensure that the participant information letters and consent forms are written in very plain and simple English, or better yet if possible translated to their appropriate first language, to ensure that all participants understand the research and their involvement in it.

I have learned that when working with Indigenous community members, it is important to

collect data at a time that is most suitable for the participants' schedule. I always try to be as flexible as possible and understand that plans for collecting data may change at any given time. This may be for simple things like getting a ride into town for groceries or more serious situations, such as a community member passing, which can result in communities shutting down for a period of time. During longer sessions with focus groups, I provided refreshments such as juice, fruit, and ice blocks (popsicles) on hot days. During some of the discussions and collaborative work times, deeply emotional and personally sensitive stories, recollections, and photographs were shared. In this setting, the availability of a community counselor for anyone who wished to discuss in depth the emotions and memories evoked through looking at the photos and sharing in the discussions was a valuable consideration that I provided, and I always reassured participants that they had the option of withdrawing from the study at any time.

Collaboration

Another concept that has been important to consider in my work is collaboration. As stated above, it is important to acknowledge my connection with the community and that I understand my place in and relationship with that community. The research that I have completed has never been research *on* or research *about* a group of Indigenous people. It has always been and always will be research *with* a group or community of Indigenous people. My research is never about collecting data—it is about sharing knowledge and working together in community strength.

Most recently, I traveled to Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory of Australia. My work there was unique because in this case the school was not interested in working with me, but the community was. In this instance, my permission came from the institution ethics committee based on the welcome from the community council as well as the traditional owners of the land. These owners provided two women to work with me and walk through the town over several days, introducing me and gathering participants for that particular project. By the end of my time there, I had been adopted as a “yappa” (sister) to one of the Elders: I was blessed with a skin name and welcomed into the family with an evening of ceremonial singing and dancing.

Working together with a community with the goal to share positivity and strength has also resulted in a request, on the part of one community, for non-anonymity. In my PhD work, the community council and focus group members asked that their real names be used, and they wanted their community to be identified and recognized for the work of which they had been a part. Perhaps this challenges the risk assumption on the level of ethics and ethical engagement with communities and urges the researcher(s) to give the communities a choice in the matter and not only think of Indigenous communities and participants as those who need protection from research, but as those who need recognition through research.

Cultural Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge and heritage are sacred gifts and responsibilities that must be honored and held for the benefit of Indigenous peoples and their future generations. It was my responsibility as a researcher to be aware of and act consistently with the unique laws of each group of Indigenous peoples that I had the privilege to work with. There have been times in my

experiences when I have unknowingly made mistakes and had often wondered why “the rules” had not been properly explained to me. I can remember being invited to visit a teepee where women were preparing the meat after a recent and successful hunt. Wearing my rubber boots, I entered the tent and applied my utmost interest looking over the cuts of meat, the moose head in the corner, and the smoking fire in the center of the teepee curing the thinly cut strips of caribou laid over handcrafted wooden racks. The following day, I thanked the Elder who had extended the invitation. “You won’t be invited again soon,” she replied. I was shocked. She went on to explain that I had broken a variety of rules, such as wearing my boots in the teepee and stepping over the meat. As I am a woman, the meat was ruined when I stepped over it. Horrified, I realized that I had so much to learn and that it was actually my responsibility to ask before acting.

From that point forward, I sought out an Indigenous Cultural Mentor when I was doing work with the community—someone who knew the community and its people—to act as a liaison to help guide me through the appropriate steps to ensure that the core values of the community were always respected and that cultural norms and traditions, as well as the core values, were not just known, but comprehended and abided by. The Indigenous community members who participated in the projects were reminded and, at times, made aware of their rights in the research process as outlined in the “Ethical conduct in research with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples and communities: Guidelines for researchers and stakeholders” as updated by the National Health and Medical Research Council (NMRC) in 2018 and in the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (AIATSIS, 2012) document entitled “Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies.” Intellectual property rights were kept at the forefront of all parts of my research projects and care was taken to conduct the research in such a manner as to not violate these rights, but instead to validate them and encourage their use. In this way, the community and the participants who volunteered their time and wisdom own the information that they share, the stories they tell, and the presentations they make. I felt extremely honored and secure in my PhD research thesis when a well-known, respected Elder and educator went through every page of the thesis and marked the pages to ensure that the community was satisfied with what was said and how it was presented. This version of my thesis means more to me than the leather-bound copy on my shelf. I fashioned a small “graduation celebration” in the community when the project was completed, and each research participant received a copy of the thesis. The same Elder was also invited by our Dean of Education to be the guest speaker at the university convocation when I graduated.

Compensation

For many remote and isolated Indigenous communities where I have spent time, alongside the societal challenges that distance and small community politics can bring, there are often accompanying financial struggles. In my experience, when I begin the journey with a community, there is a common query of whether there will be financial incentives for those partaking in the research project. As is the case with many researchers, my projects, unfortunately, have no allowance in the budget that could provide cash reimbursement to participants. I have never had a community turn me away or decide not to be involved on this basis. What I always have to offer is my authentic self, a listening ear, the desire to learn, and the

acknowledgment of all individuals and participants who volunteered for the projects. I have also sent letters of thanks and tokens of appreciation to focus groups involved, and, in all cases, we held a celebration feast for all of the community to recognize and celebrate our accomplishments.

Final Thoughts

American Lecturer Peter Senge (1998) said, “Sharing knowledge occurs when people are genuinely interested in helping one another develop new capacities for action; it is about creating learning processes” (p. 11). The experiences, stories, and lessons learned and shared within the paragraphs of this piece provide reflections for future researchers engaging Indigenous communities. Some of my experiences may be applicable to you, and some may not. As a researcher, I am very aware of my own limited Indigenous connection with these communities, but I make it a priority and a privilege to continue to build relationships with each community and all the members of the community possible. Working together to build knowledge and understanding together with Indigenous communities is not a quick and easy process and should not be undertaken lightly nor hurriedly. Just as with any other relationship, it takes time and careful nurturing.

By considering the opinions and reflections presented in this narrative, I feel confident in knowing that I am respecting Indigenous knowledge and learning practices, engaging community leadership, and, most of all, remembering to focus on the needs of the communities themselves. In sharing this story with you, I believe that I have shared my knowledge about how we can lessen the divide between Indigenous communities and other communities in our society and respectfully embark on research together. This is success for us all.

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