

Ogichigiyabi; Mentorship as a Îethka Research Method

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Sitting in the Exshaw District Council Chambers, listening to the president of the MacDougall Church Historic Society argue against the Nakoda First Nation regarding an application to have their historic church rebuilt, an Îethka Elder leaned close to me and whispered “we need our own museum.” This was not the first time someone from the community had said something like this to me but the request, made in response to a direct attack on Îethka sovereignty by a historic institution, impacted me greatly. For several years now I’ve been having discussions with Îethka people about their access to items that are held by museums and archives. These discussions and guidance from Îethka people are what led me to my current academic journey; to research ways that Îethka people might gain greater access to and control to their cultural belongings held by public institutions such as museums and archives. I see their guidance in the frame of mentorship, and through protocol some individuals have committed to continue this mentorship throughout the research process. My intent is to frame the practice of mentoring as a research method for this dissertation work, (which in itself is a method for a larger project). I see this as an extension of my current relationship with Îethka people; there are people in the community that have explicitly told me what they want from my work and have been willing to show me why it matters, and likewise there are youth who are profoundly interested in the work, and readily demonstrate ways to operationalize what we learn in their lives.

I find mentorship compelling as a research method for several reasons. Primarily, it describes an ongoing relationship already in place. This happened as a result of the actions of Îethka people, therefore it feels to me like a method that they chose for our collaboration. Secondly, several Indigenous scholars identify mentorship as an appropriate method for non-Indigenous people to work within (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Kovach 2009). They identify the omnidirectional learning that takes place in mentorship as beneficial to all participants, capable of enriching the research and its outcomes (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Kovach 2009). Thirdly,

methods that bridge theory and practice and which are process oriented have been identified by Indigenous researchers as aligned with Indigenous epistemology, and appropriate for use in Indigenous communities (Absolon, 2011; Gaudry 2015). Lastly, mentorship has become part of my personal practice, developed with guidance from Indigenous colleagues; Kovach (2009) suggests that Indigenous research methods are part of, not separate from, lifeways and that in order to use lifeways effectively in research they should be deeply ingrained and “fundamental” (p. 96).

As a non-Indigenous person who is sometimes considered a member of Treaty 7 Indigenous communities, I am responsible to be mindful of the privileges I hold and receive. This consideration is due to my involvement in community groups, and my personal relationships to Indigenous people. My privilege stems from both the genocidal process of colonization that took place on this land, and the coloniality that follows and which reinforces the systems and structures set in place by my European ancestors. I became involved in the Indigenous community here as a result of my desire to conduct my life in ways that support justice, firstly as a volunteer at the Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary. Although it has been my intention to work in tourism and heritage since I can remember, this volunteerism led me to relationships that encouraged me to align my work with the interests of Treaty 7 peoples. As such, my practice as a researcher and a museum professional includes adopting decolonizing tactics and holding space for diverse epistemologies. However, speaking of my practice in segmented ways feels somewhat disingenuous, as I try to live my values in all aspects of my life, and endeavor not to act as though my research activities and career are divorced from my personal life, beliefs, and actions.

In her book *Braiding the Sweetgrass* Robin Kimmerer (2013) describes aspects of western science through a different way of seeing; that is, she shifts the readers focus to see

the rigor of Indigenous epistemology. Kimmerer (2013) does this by weaving or braiding together three narrative themes that forge one single story: her positionality, her understanding of western science, and her experiences of Indigenous wisdom. Within this work Kimmerer (2013) describes the reciprocity that underlies Indigenous epistemology, and describes how mutual collaboration is integral to both expanding knowledge, and personal growth. She does this by describing the three sister plants, corn, squash, and beans, and how they grow together (Kimmerer, 2013, pp. 128-140). She suggests that each plant has its own gifts to offer, and that community is made stronger by each one sharing their gifts, and providing what they uniquely can to the world (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 134). Kimmerer (2013) also suggests that this, and other plant knowledge is directly observable and has real world consequences such as the growth of fruits and the nourishing of bodies: "The truth of our relationship with the soil is written more clearly on the land than in any book" (p. 138). Likewise, within a research context, the effectiveness of the mentorship involved will be borne out in the work. If relationships are mutually valued and valuable, the resulting research will be useful for the community involved. As Audra Simpson (2007) suggests, despite limitations due to power imbalances, Indigenous people are able to express agency over their research participation and will deny access to knowledge if they do not see value in sharing it. In this way, mentorship provides a rigor to research that demands trust, respect, and care.

As an undergraduate student who frequently volunteered behind the scenes on independent film sets, I was asked to assist a friend on a film project he was making. Eager to support his arts practice, I agreed before learning my task was to perform as a zombie bride. On the day of the shoot I confessed to the make up artist, a Cree-Metis woman, that I was terrified of acting and had only agreed to help because I cared about our mutual friend. The intimacy of our interaction, and of my confession, gave a strong beginning to the friendship that quickly grew between us. From that point on she and I worked together on many projects, which have

led us both to important endeavors in our lives. She encouraged me to volunteer for the Nakoda Nation at Morley Community School, where I ultimately met my partner. Together she and I developed projects such as plays, youth activities, and other creative endeavors. She taught me how to approach our work with care and sensitivity to the issues faced by Indigenous people, and she taught me protocol for respect and listening. I supported our work through administrative and legal hoops to get the funding and organizational support we needed for projects.

Kathryn Coff and Jo Lampert (2009) identify some of the work that I've undertaken as part of a practice of co-mentorship, which they define as a learning relationship that eschews the power dynamics typical of western mentoring models. Their work, entitled *Mentoring as Two-Way Learning: An Australian First Nations/Non-indigenous Collaboration* positions mentoring as a suitable approach to cross-cultural engagement and learning (Coff & Lampert, 2009). In their experience this type of mentorship involves a flow between the participants that changes direction and volume depending on circumstances, is dependent on trust, and on a deep relationship that exists regardless of the "professional" work (Coff & Lampert, 2009). While they frame mentorship as a professional practice, they argue that the value of this tool is that their relationship transcends western professional boundaries (Coff & Lampert, 2009). They highlight the significance of this type of mentorship as it provides space for Indigenous ways of knowing, while challenging dominant norms which may seem naturalized, but which are actually rooted in settler culture and which represent ongoing coloniality (Coff & Lampert, 2009). The traditional expectation of mentorship may set up the expectation that Indigenous people need to be mentored into positions of academic power. Coff and Lampert (2009) suggest that co-mentoring implies that Indigenous people do not necessarily desire to adopt the positions that traditional non-indigenous academic mentorship may open for them, and that Indigenous participants in co-mentorship bring just as much, if not more, expertise to the relationship.

While volunteering for Morley Community School I was asked to apply for a paid position at the school board. During my tenure at Stoney Education Authority (SEA) I was put on a team with three Nakoda community members who all took different approaches to mentoring with me. I was lucky to build relationships with these individuals, and to benefit from their expertise. Using my skills to gather peer reviewed research, and their extensive knowledge of Nakoda history, language, culture, and community we were able to design effective interventions in student attendance at the schools. Before entering this position, (in addition to learning with the Cree-Metis woman) I studied at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, where most of my courses engaged with Indigenous epistemology in at least some ways. I was fortunate to take a class with (the late) Angayuqaq Oscar Kawagley who thoroughly engrained in me the importance of listening. I believe the respect I brought to SEA helped foster the relationship of trust that allowed our team to work so effectively together. Likewise, the copious amounts of grace and forgiveness that the Nakoda team members brought to the collaboration helped us all to overcome my shortcomings and ignorance.

Both Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) and Margret Kovach (2009) explicitly identify mentorship as an appropriate method for non-Indigenous researchers to work with Indigenous community. In her influential book, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* Tuhiwai Smith (2012) suggests that there are several approaches that non-Indigenous people have taken to critiques of their involvement in Indigenous research work, some of which have positive outcomes for researchers and communities, and some of which do not (p. 179). She references Māori academic Graham Smith, who identifies Indigenous communities as potential mentors for non-Indigenous academics as a means to building more productive research (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 179). This is not only because mentorship is culturally sensitive and empathetic, but also because it represents a means to shift practice so that it

better aligns with strategies to actually improve Indigenous peoples lives (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, 180). Meanwhile Kovach (2009) suggests that Indigenous researchers would be well served by non-Indigenous researchers who can support them to navigate the complexities of the academic world (pp. 168-170). However, throughout her discussion she continually highlights that these efforts would be best undertaken by collaborative approach rather than through traditional western hierarchical mentorship models (Kovach, 2009, 170). She refers to these as “co” productions echoing the language of Coff and Lampert (2009; Kovach, 2009).

The word Ogichigiyabi in Îethka refers to helping, or working (O) together (gichi); it is sometimes used at a feast, when someone has prepared food, and they invite you to go ahead and take what you need. I’ve also heard it used when people are being invited or directed to work together. I am trying to improve my Îethka language skills and to include language in whatever work I do, on the suggestion of a mentor. While the strength of mentorship as a distinct research method is not well described in literature, I believe that its congruencies with more well described methods, such as its ability to center Îethka perspectives, its amiability to rigor, and its inherent connection to relationship and community, make it a suitable research method choice for my work. Most important however, it’s a method that the Îethka people themselves have stewarded me towards, and initiated in order to deliver the research outcomes they themselves desire.

References

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