RESPECTFUL RESEARCH: EVIDENCED BASED STEPS TO SUCCESSFULLY WORKING WITH INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Michelle Eady
University of Wollongong, Australia

ABSTRACT

It is an absolute privilege to conduct research in partnership with Indigenous people. That privilege carries significant responsibility to give and not just take. Good research is designed, from the outset, to ensure that the time and precious knowledge volunteered by Indigenous participants serves to create positive outcomes for their communities. Having worked and lived in Indigenous communities in Canada and Australia for nearly two decades, I have learned a great deal about how to conduct research that generates reciprocal benefits. It requires a clear focus on how research is conducted.

INTRODUCTION

I recently watched an interesting talk in which a qualitative researcher called herself a 'story teller' and described qualitative data as 'data with a soul' (Brown, 2010). Because of my personal experiences, I found myself relating to this at a deep level. I think this paper will be more meaningful if I explain why.

I have a connection with Indigenous peoples. I am not sure why or how this happened and as far as I know I do not have an Indigenous ancestry. Even as a child, I felt destined to work with Indigenous people and to help others understand the strengths that lie within their communities. It is work I am passionate about.

After graduating as a primary school teacher from the University of Wollongong in New South Wales, Australia, I travelled back to Canada to work in remote and isolated communities. I spent time in a Cree community called Fort Severn, located as far north as possible in the province of Ontario, where I taught a year 3 / 4 composite class. That not being far enough north, the following year I ended up in the Northwest Territories, in Canada's arctic, working in a Dene community called Tulita. This fairytale tundra has ice roads, the northern lights and a rich, deep, meaningful culture, with traditions and language that people are fighting to keep alive. After living close to the Arctic Circle for a number of years, the pattern of northern exposure continued when I relocated to Northern Ontario. During the years I worked in adult literacy, I travelled to 18 of the 26 Ojibway and Cree communities in Ontario's north.

In 2007 the University of Wollongong awarded me an international scholarship. My research for this degree led me to a remote Indigenous community in South Australia. A learning curve of acceptance took place in order for the research to be completed and many lessons were acquired along the way.

I consider the approval of communities and community members a precious gift. I have never taken my opportunities to work with Indigenous communities for granted. While living and working with Indigenous people in these remote and isolated places 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, 2010).

For instance, when an Elder (a respected senior person within an Indigenous community) passes away, the tears shed are not just for that person as they were in body, whether that be a mother, grandmother, or sister, or for their role as a community leader, teacher, artist, or berry gatherer. The saddest part of losing that person is the knowledge that is lost with them. An Elder is seen as a vessel that safe-keeps a wealth of intellectual, spiritual and traditional knowledge. This knowledge is often not recorded, written or shared with others. That is not for want of the Elder trying. Rather, it is due to a lack of enthusiasm among young people as times change,

technology increases and 21st Century opportunities beckon them from their homeland. The generation in the middle – the parents of the youth and the children of the Elders – seem to feel the pain of this the most. Their culture, heritage and knowledge make them who they are, which is why they protect it with fervor.

For too many of these communities, researchers have parachuted onto their land and conducted a 'study' which has resulted in a news report or article which has an overarching message of negativity and shame. Such studies have frequently employed non-ethical and exclusive practices with little-to-no reciprocity for the Indigenous peoples involved (Elston et al., 2013, Geia et al., 2013). Such practices have "silenced many people and rendered their stories invisible" (Geia et al., 2013, p13). As a result, many communities are cautious, resistant and even unwilling to meet with researchers in an attempt to preserve their intellectual knowledge and protect their communities and their people. This caution and resistance must be considered carefully prior to the commencement of a research project, with non-Indigenous researchers in particular examining their own knowledge paradigms and practices (Hall, 2014). After all, the solution is not to abandon research in Indigenous communities, but rather to ensure that all interactions are respectful and mutually beneficial.

The purpose of the research project referred to in this paper (Eady, 2010) was to investigate how literacy needs of adult learners in an Australian Aboriginal community could effectively be supported with the use of online live-time technology. The aim was to develop best practices to support adult literacy learning in Indigenous communities. The study strived to develop an understanding and appreciation of how best to introduce and incorporate technology-based learning while respecting a specific Australian Indigenous cultural context. It aimed to develop globally-applicable principles to inform and support teaching and researching in these contexts. However, along the pathway of the project it became evident that the way that we approach the research we do in Indigenous communities is as important, if not more important than the research itself.

KEY CONCEPTS TO CONSIDER WHEN WORKING IN INDIGENOUS COMMUNITIES

Anyone who has done research with Indigenous communities understands the complexities of obtaining ethical approval to proceed with their research. In Australia, Aboriginal participants are considered 'high risk' participants and therefore require special attention and care. In addition to standard ethics requirements it is recommended that the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies published by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (2012) is used in the development of ethics applications. The guidelines provide researchers with 14 principles to follow as they conduct their research. These principles are grouped under the following categories:

- rights;
- respect and recognition;
- negotiation;
- consultation, agreement and mutual understanding;
- participation, collaboration and partnership;
- benefits, outcomes and giving back;
- managing research: use, storage and access; and,
- reporting and compliance.

These principles are vital to respectful research with Indigenous communities. It is highly recommended that researchers adhere to these guidelines, both in their ethics proposals and in planning to work with communities.
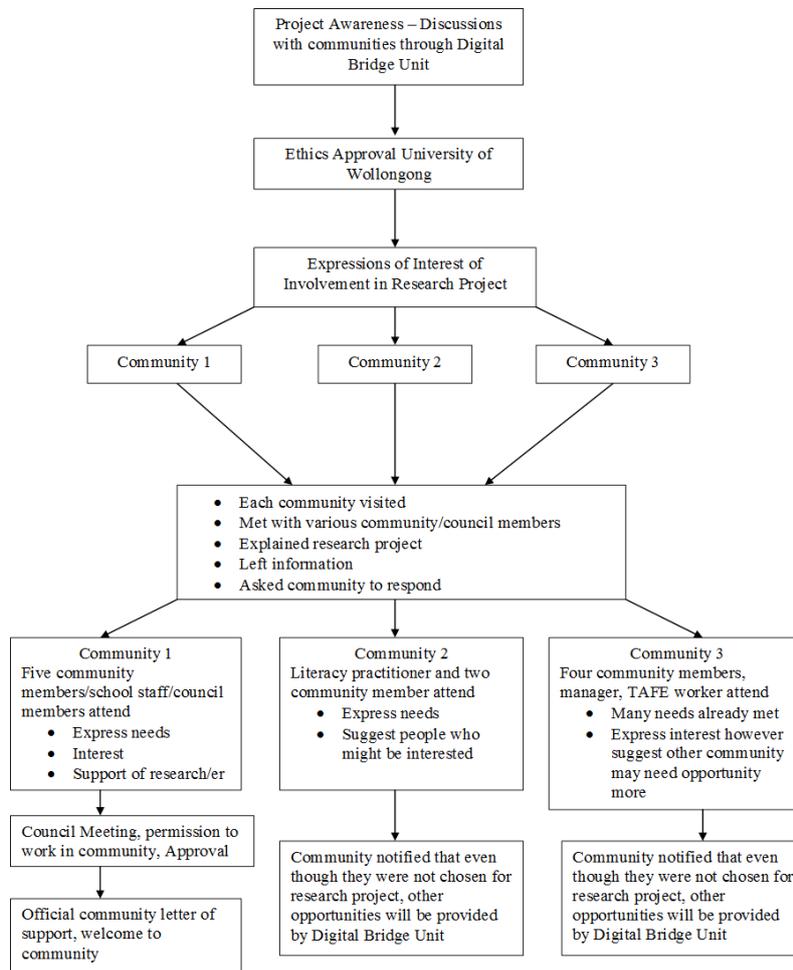
RELATIONSHIPS

Each of the categories above is important for successful research. However, having worked as an outsider in Indigenous communities, the thing most vital to successful research is building meaningful and reciprocal relationships. Take for example the research I carried out for my PhD. The process began when I met someone at a conference and we starting talking about the possibilities for Indigenous people in Australia to have access to the successes experienced by my adult Aboriginal literacy students in Canada. That chance meeting with someone from the Digital Bridge Unit in South Australia was the opening to a relationship that ultimately led to my study.

Once I had the opportunity to study in Australia, and was preparing my proposal and ethics review, I sought out the Aboriginal representative on the ethics committee at the university. I felt it was my responsibility as a researcher to connect and ask for her guidance and support. It was important to explain who I was, my experience working with Aboriginal communities, and how my work would be used for the good of any Indigenous community I worked in.

From there I visited three communities with my contact from the Digital Bridge Unit. At each site I contacted the Aboriginal land council and asked permission to be on Aboriginal land, explained who I was and asked to make a presentation at the next council meeting. There, I offered gifts made by local Aboriginal people from my part of Canada and delivered a PowerPoint presentation to share my story of the Indigenous people in Canada.

Once the university had approved my ethics proposal, I revisited each of the three communities to define their interests and needs, discuss the depth of the research and the community commitment it would require and to leave information and contact details. These visits provided an introduction and fostered a partnership-based approach. Community council members discussed issues that their community members faced and how being involved in the research could benefit their community and other Aboriginal communities. The approach is represented in the diagram below:

FIGURE 1. PARTICIPANT SELECTION PROCESS

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┌──────────────────────────────┐
│ Project Awareness – Discussions │
│ with communities through Digital │
│        Bridge Unit             │
└──────────────────────────────┘
                │
┌──────────────────────────────┐
│  Ethics Approval University of │
│          Wollongong            │
└──────────────────────────────┘
                │
┌──────────────────────────────┐
│  Expressions of Interest of    │
│ Involvement in Research Project│
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Community 1	Community 2	Community 3

- Each community visited
- Met with various community/council members
- Explained research project
- Left information
- Asked community to respond

Community 1
Five community members/school staff/council members attend
- Express needs
- Interest
- Support of research/er

Community 2
Literacy practitioner and two community member attend
- Express needs
- Suggest people who might be interested

Community 3
Four community members, manager, TAFE worker attend
- Many needs already met
- Express interest however suggest other community may need opportunity more

Council Meeting, permission to work in community, Approval

Official community letter of support, welcome to community

Community notified that even though they were not chosen for research project, other opportunities will be provided by Digital Bridge Unit

Community notified that even though they were not chosen for research project, other opportunities will be provided by Digital Bridge Unit

The importance of taking great care to ensure that you have permission and are welcomed into a community cannot be stressed enough. It is a privilege, to be treated with great respect. In most cases, the community councils treat researchers being in the community as an agenda item in their community meeting. The item of the researcher's presence in the community is put on the table and the letters from the researcher, and their research and ethics plan, are discussed. Depending on that meeting and the discussion that takes place a researcher will be granted permission to be present in the community and this will be advised by the head of the council.

In many cases when embarking on research projects with Indigenous communities, it is very helpful to ask a respected community Elder to escort you around the community and introduce you to key community members. These meetings are most effective when they take place in busy local venues such as the health building, the school and the TAFE (community college). They may even include knocking on other Elders' doors to see whether they have time for tea.
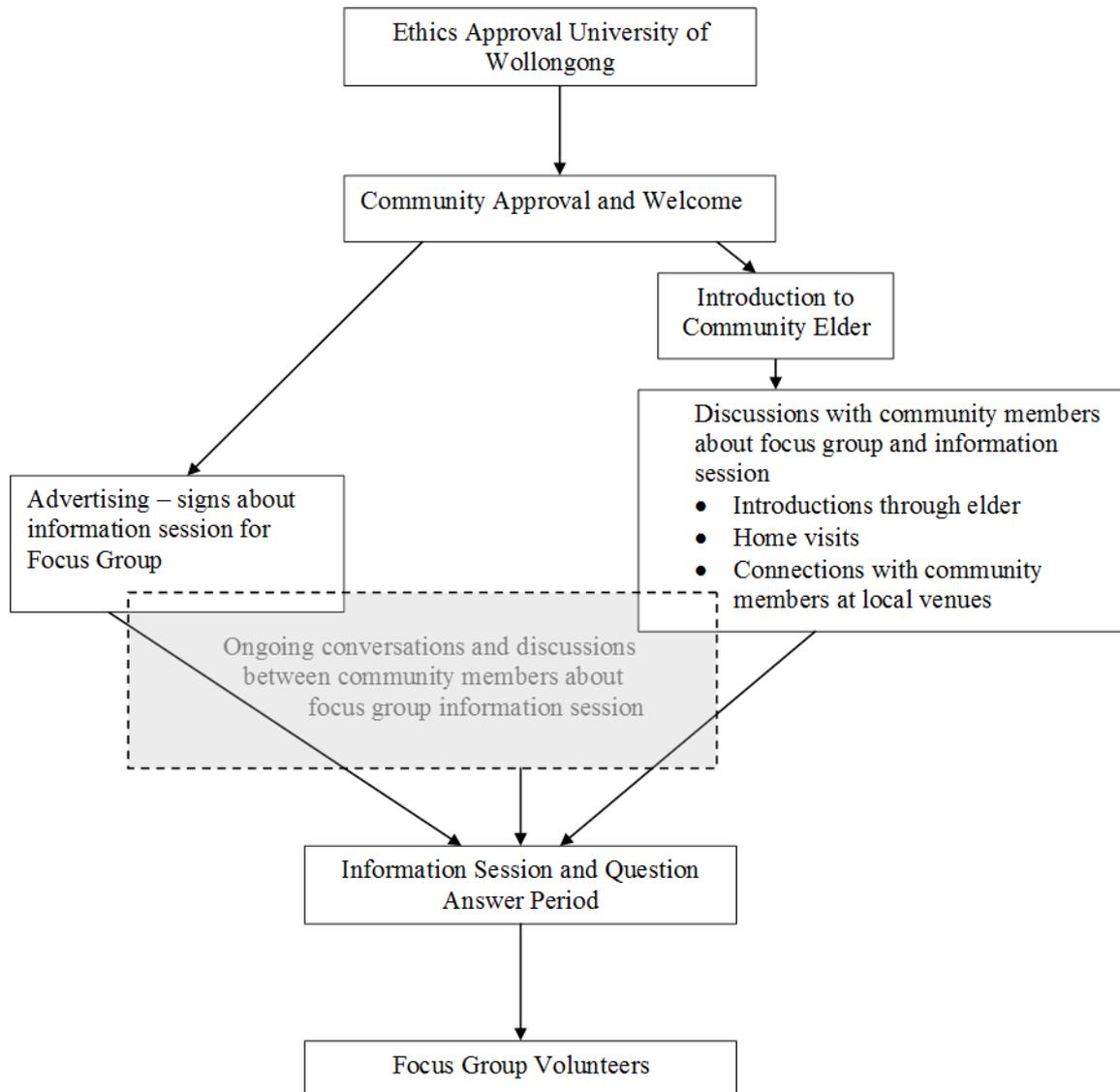
During one of my projects, I asked for a meeting with the community council in order to gain council members' support. At the meeting I explained the purpose of the research project and that it could only be achieved with the community's help. The council was very supportive with one man saying, "I think that this is a great idea for our people. To give them the opportunity to learn like this is important." Two female council representatives sitting on the other side of the table whispered to one another before nodding their heads in approval. One said, "You have our full support." Council members were asked to spread the word about the first focus group and suggest it to people they thought would be suitable participants. The Council also asked the researcher to draft a letter that members could all sign to show their support for the project.

COLLABORATION

It is also important to consider collaboration. The research 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. In the case of the research mentioned above, the community council and focus group members asked not to remain anonymous. They wanted their real names included and for their community to be recognised for the work it contributed.

After the council meeting, members helped me to hang up signs around the town. I simply created A4 computer print outs with information about the project I was going to do, advertising the focus group and welcoming anyone to join. Community members were asked to volunteer their time over two months. They would gain the opportunity to work together to create a meaningful literacy experience and learn to use a synchronous platform which was available for community use. All community focus group and council members received a copy of the community members' participant information sheet, which was read aloud with the group. All the community focus group members and council members signed the community member participation consent form. The figure below depicts the strategy for recruiting volunteer community members:

FIGURE 2. PARTICPANT RECRUITMENT STRATEGY

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              ┌─────────────────────────────┐
              │  Ethics Approval University  │
              │       of Wollongong          │
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                             ▼
              ┌─────────────────────────────┐
              │ Community Approval and Welcome│
              └───────┬──────────────┬───────┘
                      │              │
                      │              ▼
                      │    ┌──────────────────┐
                      │    │  Introduction to │
                      │    │  Community Elder │
                      │    └────────┬─────────┘
                      │             ▼
                      │   ┌───────────────────────────────┐
                      │   │ Discussions with community     │
                      │   │ members about focus group and  │
                      │   │ information session            │
                      ▼   │  • Introductions through elder │
  ┌─────────────────────┐ │  • Home visits                 │
  │ Advertising – signs │ │  • Connections with community  │
  │ about information   │ │    members at local venues     │
  │ session for Focus   │ └──────────────┬────────────────┘
  │ Group               │                │
  └──────────┬──────────┘                │
             │  ┌─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ┐ │
             │   Ongoing conversations    │
             │   and discussions between  │
             │   community members about  │
             │   focus group information  │
             │  └─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ─ ┘ │
             ▼                             ▼
        ┌──────────────────────────────────┐
        │ Information Session and Question  │
        │        Answer Period             │
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        ┌──────────────────────────────────┐
        │      Focus Group Volunteers      │
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CULTURAL MENTOR

Aboriginal knowledge and heritage are sacred gifts and responsibilities that must be honored and held for the benefit of Aboriginal peoples and their future generations. It is a researcher's responsibility to be aware of, and act consistently with, the laws of Aboriginal peoples. The Aboriginal communities involved in my projects have six core values. These include reciprocity, respect, equality, survival and protection, responsibility, spirit and integrity. These values were adhered to in every facet of the research.

If possible, it is recommended that an Aboriginal cultural mentor – someone who knows the community and its people – acts as a liaison to guide the researcher and help to ensure core values are respected and cultural norms and traditions are recognised and adhered to.

Aboriginal community members who participated in the research discussed earlier were made aware of their rights throughout the research process, as outlined in the Guidelines for Ethical Research in Australian Indigenous Studies published by the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies (2012). Throughout the research, intellectual property rights were a focus. Throughout the research process, care was taken to ensure these rights were validated and encouraged by synchronous technologies.

COMLPIANCE AND UNDERSTANDING

It is ethical practice for all study participants to be fully informed about research prior to it taking place. The statistics mentioned earlier highlight that research within Indigenous communities is often undertaken in the context of low literacy. It is recommended that researchers take extra precautions by reading the information letter and consent forms out loud with the participant volunteers, defining anything requiring higher level literacy and answering participants' questions. Another approach is to ensure that letters and consent forms are written in plain English or translated to the native language.

When working with Indigenous community members, it is important to collect data at times that best suit participants' schedules. The researcher also must be flexible and understand that plans for collecting data may change. This may be due to something relatively trivial, like a participant getting an unexpected ride into town for groceries, or something more serious, like a community member passing away, which always results in communities shutting down for a period of time.

Consider participants' comfort during focus groups. During longer sessions on hot days, consider providing refreshments such as juice, fruit and ice blocks.

In the research I have described, some discussions and collaborative work resulted in deeply emotional and personally sensitive stories, recollections and photographs being shared. Participants were reassured that they had the option of withdrawing from the research at any time. It may be important to have a community counsellor available for people wanting to discuss feelings conjured up by focus group discussions.

PAYMENT FOR PARTICIPATION

Many Indigenous communities experience financial struggles alongside their education struggles. Research participants have often asked me whether financial incentives would be offered. I don't offer payment, because I feel it is important for participation to be voluntary. However, in the case of my past research, the community has asked to be acknowledged and identified in the research results. I have sent letters of thanks and tokens of appreciation to focus group participants and we always have some kind of celebration to acknowledge our accomplishments.

CELEBRATION

In one case a community dinner was held to thank participants and their families. Participants received small tokens of appreciation and binders with information on their new skills. We also held a community graduation, where each research participant was verbally acknowledged, given a certificate of appreciation and a copy of the thesis made possible by their contribution. That was a very proud day for the community and very much appreciated by the members who participated in the data collection phase of the research.

VARIOUS PROJECTS

What of the research that was done to come to the conclusions and suggestions I have made? Where did these thoughts and ideas come from? For the major body of work I have referred to in the sections above, two groups of participants were recruited. The first consisted of practitioners who work with Indigenous communities, community members and/or with Indigenous education issues, in either a face-to-face or computer-based capacity. These practitioners, located in various states across Australia, brought a wealth of educational backgrounds and experience to the study.

The second group of participants consisted of members of a specific Indigenous community located in a region of South Australia. The community members were voluntary participants who varied in age, gender, employment and literacy levels. Their community is considered rural or remote at it is at least 20 km from any adjacent towns and approximately 200 km from the nearest major city centre.

This research project was a qualitative study, using a design-based research approach (Amiel and Reeves, 2008, van den Akker et al., 2006) which Wang and Hannafin (2005) define as "a systematic but flexible methodology aimed to improve educational practices through iterative analysis, design, development, and implementation, based on collaboration among researchers and practitioners in real-world settings and leading to contextually sensitive design principles and theories" (p6–7). Battiste (2008) suggests that respecting Indigenous research methods requires that communities have direct input in "developing and defining research practices and projects that relate to them" (p503). This project took every effort to ensure that the community was involved in this way at every step of the research process.

EIGHT PRINICPLES FOR CONDUCTING RESPECTFUL RESEARCH

The research concluded there were 11 design-based principles for establishing optimal learning environments for effective use of technologies to support adult Aboriginal literacy learners (Eady, 2010). However, of those 11 principles there are eight which stand-alone in guiding respectful research in Indigenous communities:

1.   Develop skills and awareness of Aboriginal learners' profiles

        This principle suggests that researchers must present themselves in confident, competent, adaptable and flexible ways. An awareness of literacy levels and preferred learning styles is needed to connect with community members and to help make the research relevant to the community's needs, ensure it is community focused and community driven (Hall, 2014, Battiste, 2008). Further to this, while research often requires high literacy levels, there is no need to underestimate the ability of Aboriginal community members. Appropriate expectations of each individual must be considered (Altman and Fogarty, 2010).

2.   Utilise relevant content

Relevant and adaptable content is needed to create successful research experiences for Aboriginal communities. This content must be created in consultation with the community if it is to result in empowerment, ownership, and an authentic voice for the community (Hall, 2014, Geia et al., 2013). Try to employ content that:

- helps Aboriginal adults better understand their identity as an Aboriginal person,
- connects content to cultures and traditions,
- encompasses community values,
- grows from community knowledge,
- has been created in consultation with the community.

3.   Value cultural inclusion

In any research setting there should be a consideration of culture in the explanation and implementation stages, including geographic area, living conditions, socioeconomic status and language group. This principle focusses on cultural inclusion, in consultation with the community, at every level of research. The aim should always be to design research that is created from within the community. It must be for community members and be inclusive of them (Bajada and Trayler, 2014, Hall, 2014). When possible use learning materials that are community-centred and grounded in local language.

4.   Foster intergenerational community involvement

When possible, try to include the whole community in research. When viable and appropriate, include everyone from children through to Elders in the process (Rao et al., 2011).

5.   Build positive relationships and mentoring support

There are opportunities for mentors throughout the research process. They may include peers, community members and Elders. These mentors play an important role in the community's motivation to complete the research (Hall, 2014, Rao et al., 2011). These mentors can help researchers by liaising and:

- making time for relationship building and gaining trust,
- gaining community respect by obtaining permission to be on the land,
- meeting with the community council regularly,
- having energy to put into research,
- supporting participants,
- providing insights into the community to help ensure research is sensitive to its needs

6.   Promote community-based research

Community collaboration and taking a holistic kinship approach is key to research with Indigenous communities being successful. Using Aboriginal strengths (including oral storytelling, song, the Dreamings and language) promotes familiarity and a feeling of comfort for participants, as does allowing them to choose the location and setting for their participation (Bainbridge et al., 2013, Geia et al., 2013).

7.   Understand community goals, directions, and development

Ideally, research should develop community support systems, providing links to the outside world and helping to make communities more self-sufficient. Achieving this requires an understanding of the deep concern many Aboriginal communities have for their children, their land, their community's sustainability, and future generations. Researchers' core concern should be how their research with communities can help those communities (Bainbridge et al., 2013, Geia et al., 2013, Hall, 2014).

8.   Embrace Aboriginal Ways of Knowing and Learning through Elder education

Elder education is a term used to describe the knowledge, wisdom and experience that Elders share with others. Elder education provides wisdom and reflection on the history of the people. It also requires expertise in sharing and passing down this knowledge in an Aboriginal context. Elders should be considered part of a unique subculture and involved in all stages of research. It is vital to embrace their knowledge, consult and incorporate attributes of Elder education throughout the research process (Bainbridge et al., 2013, Elston et al., 2013, Geia et al., 2013).

Aboriginal Ways of Knowing and Learning must be considered when developing methodologies and research structures. Different from culture, Aboriginal Ways of Knowing and Learning provide a framework for how Aboriginal people view knowledge; a gift that belongs to an individual, which started before they were born and continues throughout life. Including this as a free-standing design principle reflects the importance of preserving unique local knowledge, and in doing so, preserving culture and community (Butler et al., 2012, Des Jarlais, 2008, Hill et al., 2012, Kinuthia, 2007, Kinuthia and Nkonge, 2005).

NEW LESSON LEARNED

Most recently, I embarked on a research project which is taking a look at children's understanding of self through drawing, based on the works of Alerby and Bergmark (2012) and Alerby (2010). This research, as with all research, began with an ethics approval from my institution. I went to great lengths to ensure that I followed all guidelines. I took the time to ensure I had employed the eight guiding principles concluded from my previous research and experiences in Aboriginal communities. The ethics application was onerous and required several drafts and resubmissions based on feedback received. One of the reviews asked that I contact the ethics council in Canada to ensure I was also following their protocol. I contacted a few different areas of the Canadian Government to ensure that I was following appropriate protocols and procedures. I was assured on a few occasions that I had taken the correct steps and that the ethics council served as a support mechanism for communities, foundations or individuals, should a complaint be made against a researcher. I was very careful to contact the schools I hoped to visit, the communities where the schools were located and local council offices and education boards. I had a welcoming hand extended from every place I contacted. I was on my way back to the Arctic!

Although I have nearly two decades of experience working and living in Indigenous communities in both Canada in Australia, there are things that I continue to learn along the way. In this instance two adages rang true: 'Some things are not as easy as they seem', and 'If it seems too good to be true, it probably is'.

By chance I met a young woman travelling for her work who was staying at the same hotel as me. She mentioned the Aurora Research Institute (ARI). The ARI is a research division of Aurora College and its mandate is to "improve the quality of life for NWT (Northwest Territories) residents by applying scientific, technological and Indigenous knowledge to solve northern problems and advance social and economic goals" (ARI, 2014). The ARI delivers on their mandate in different ways, such as:

• promoting communication between researchers and the people of the communities in which they work;

• promoting public awareness of the importance of science, technology and indigenous knowledge;

• fostering a scientific community within the North West Territories which recognises and uses the traditional knowledge of northern Aboriginal peoples;

• making scientific and traditional knowledge available to people of the NWT;

• supporting or conducting research which contributes to the social, cultural and economic;

• licensing and coordinating research in accordance with the NWT Scientists Act.

The sticky point for me was that I needed a license to conduct research in the province I was visiting. Even though I had done my homework, no one (not at the government level, at any of the councils, communities or schools) had mentioned the ARI. My new friend suggested that I should be staying in the dorms they have available for researchers because it is much less expensive that staying at hotels. I was intrigued and contacted ARI. The gentleman on the other end of the line, the first person ever to mention anything of the sort, said I would need a research license. He suggested I discontinue my research and leave the area, which came as a great shock. I had spent more than $10,000 to do this project and travelled from the coast of Australia to the arctic of Canada. Suddenly it was all for naught.

Luckily for me, the story has a happy ending. After extensive discussions, an ARI manager was very pleased with my efforts to ensure my research was conducted with the upmost respect for communities. I had embraced the ARI standards in my preparation without even know it. Due to the circumstances, as long as I had the schools' and communities' written approval, I could continue with my research, provided I didn't publish until after my license was approved.

The ARI places all information from researchers' documents into their online system called POLAR (Portal to Online Licence Applications for Research). All community councils, Aboriginal bands, Metis organisations and anyone else who might be influenced by the research is invited to view the documents and ask questions. They are given approximately seven weeks to ask questions, or approve what they have read. The researcher must answer any questions satisfactorily and achieve approval from everyone consulted in order to achieve a license to do research in the Northwest Territories. Working with the ARI was a new lesson learned for me and I appreciate what they are doing to do to protect their people, their culture and their land.

As researchers we must be very careful about the steps we take to work with Indigenous communities. The ARI's mission is "To develop our northern society through excellence in education, training and research that is culturally sensitive and responsive to the people we serve" (ARI, 2014). I would like to think all researchers who work with Indigenous communities hold the same research mandate for themselves.

FINAL THOUGHTS

The experiences, lessons learned and design-based principles I have discussed provide sound, evidence-based guidelines for future research engaging Aboriginal communities everywhere.

When researchers respect Indigenous knowledge and learning practices, engage community leaders and, most importantly, focus on the community's needs, there is potential for their work to lessen the divide between Indigenous communities and mainstream society. This is success for us all.

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