



Access Stories ... and a Bit More: A Talking Circle Inspired Discussion

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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on what happened when a doctoral student wanted to study an Indigenous group's approach to leadership. Three accounts are presented: the student's, her advisor's, and an Indigenous culture leader's. The accounts were developed and are being reported by using a modified version of the talking circle process employed in many Indigenous cultures. Despite modifications, the approach retained many of the characteristics of traditional talking circles and demonstrated a talking circle's potential for "transforming understanding through creative engagement."

Historically, cultural anthropologists studied Indigenous cultures. Over time, however, members of Indigenous groups suggested that: (a) Western researchers' methods are inconsistent with the relational aspects of Indigenous cultures (Atkinson, 2001; Bishop, 1998; Julien, Wright, & Zinni, 2010; Kenny & Fraser, 2012; Wilson, 2008); (b) the stories that mainstream culture researchers have told about the cultures they have studied frequently are inaccurate—or at least inconsistent with the stories that Indigenous people tell about themselves (Tuck & Fine, 2007; Smith, 1999); and (c) mainstream culture researchers normally have exploited Indigenous groups to pad their résumés and become tenured without providing significant benefits to the groups they have studied (Batisste, 2008; Jacob, 2012; Smith, 1999). Not surprisingly, there has been a movement within Indigenous communities not only to develop culturally appropriate research methods,

but also to have Indigenous cultures studied by Native scholars (Atkinson, 2001; Battiste, 2008; Farris, 2003; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008).

So, what happens, today, when a mainstream-culture researcher wants to study an Indigenous group? This paper details a doctoral student's attempt to gain access to an Indigenous group for dissertation research on the Indigenous group's conception of and approach to leadership (Buchanan & BQFNC, 2010). More specifically, it presents three accounts of what happened: the student's, her advisor's, and the account of a member of the Indigenous culture the student wanted to study.

The accounts presented here were developed by using an inquiry strategy inspired by the talking circle process employed in many Indigenous cultures, including the Cree culture that the doctoral student wanted to study. In that culture, talking circles are used for a variety of purposes (e.g., problem solving and healing). In 2008, Cree scholar Sean Wilson (2008) suggested that talking circles could even be thought of "as a research technique" (p. 41). When used for purposes of research, talking circles are, in essence, qualitative interviewing without the interviewer: "A talking circle involves people sitting in a circle, where each person has the opportunity to take an uninterrupted turn in discussing the topic" (p. 41).

One reason the three of us who participated in the talking circle-inspired discussion transcribed here believed that it might be appropriate to use an approach inspired by talking circles to reflect on what we had all just experienced—albeit in different ways, in different roles, and from different vantage points—was that talking circles invariably serve a teaching and learning function. The assumption is that every member of the circle has something valuable to contribute. Consequently, group members must attend to what is being said by everyone. After each person has spoken, the process begins again. Circle participants might respond to what others had shared earlier, or they may take the conversation in a new direction.²

The teaching and learning we envisioned differed somewhat from the teaching and learning in traditional talking circles. In this project, the audience for each speaker was not only (or even, at times, primarily) the other circle participants; rather, a major purpose for creating the material that follows was to educate *external readers* about what was being discussed.

The talking circle-inspired process we employed also differed from traditional circles in at least four other ways. First, talking circle participants in this project did not *literally* sit in a circle. They were not, in fact, in the same room, or, even, in some

cases, the same country. Second, rather than literally talking, the participants wrote what they had to say and then sent what they had written to the two other “talking” circle participants. Third, while traditional talking circles normally occur in a timeframe of hours, the “talking” circle dialogue presented here happened over a multi-month timeframe. Finally, because our modified “talking” circle was conducted in writing rather than orally, some of the conventions of written text—especially written text prepared for publication—influenced what was done. These conventions included editing for clarity and abbreviating what was written initially to fit the page-limit requirements of scholarly journals.

Despite these differences, we believe our modified talking circle process retained many of the advantages of the traditional in-person talking circle activity: We were able to represent a range of perspectives; the conversation was not overly constrained by a pre-determined purpose; and, like traditional talking circles, one speaker’s/writer’s stories are not privileged over the stories of other speakers/writers.

The Talking Circle Transcript: Round One

Julia (The Dissertation Researcher): I have been interested in leadership for as long as I can remember. While living in Hawaii and working with Native Hawaiians and Samoans, my protective shield of white privilege began to develop some *pukas* or little holes. I realized that some cultural groups thought about leadership—and many other things—differently than I did.

Fast forward to my graduate studies: When engaged in a research project for one of my classes, I was troubled when a Native American student told me about a leadership course in which he was “corrected” by the professor when he shared his view of leadership. As I probed, I learned that his view of leadership was much more collective than individual and that even his concept of *the collective* was not the same as my own or, even, the same as collaboration-oriented scholars such as Burns (1978) and Rost (1993). For the Indigenous student, concepts of collaboration were rooted in a view of the collective that pictured all things in the universe as being interrelated in a way that was as much spiritual as literal.

The more I learned, the more I realized that the Indigenous student’s view of leadership did not need to be “corrected.” Rather, I concluded that leadership literature in the West needed to be reconsidered. I began to think about Paulo Freire’s (1990)

insights about the role of colonial pedagogy in maintaining inequality. I thought, for example, about his “banking” concept of education in which students must check what they know and care about at the classroom door and play the role of *empty vessel* that teachers fill with alien knowledge. “Are the leadership ideas that I learned about in my formal education and now teach symptomatic of a ‘banking’ approach to education?” I asked myself; “do I really want to be a part of that system?” In short, I began a process I now understand as *decolonization* (Smith, 1999).

During my dissertation proposal development process, I shared my interests with Robert, my dissertation committee chair. He encouraged me to contact two First Nations alumni of the university, Pat Makokis and her sister-in-law, Leona Makokis, who Robert told me worked at a First Nations college in Canada. I decided to reach out to them through email.

I soon received a response: “Nice to meet you, Julia. Can you tell us about your family?” I was thrown a bit by the question. I could not understand the interest in my family? I thought, “What does my family have to do with this research?”

I laugh at myself now; I had a lot to learn.

Robert (Dissertation Chair): I was excited about Julia’s plan, in part because I understood that the academic literature on leadership exhibited a Western bias. My only concern was whether Julia would be able to get access to an Indigenous group to study. I had read Smith’s (1999) *Decolonizing Methodology* and the work of another Maori scholar, Russell Bishop (1998); consequently, I understood that Western scholars who want to study Indigenous groups are likely to meet with understandable resistance.

I urged Julia to contact two women who I knew about because they had completed our institution’s doctoral program before I had arrived on campus. I assumed that, as graduates of the same Leadership Studies program as Julia’s, they undoubtedly would agree—and be able to get their community to agree—to become research participants in Julia’s study.

In retrospect, I should not have been so cavalier ... or so naive.

Patricia (Indigenous Participant): My introduction to this talking circle will use the following format:

- 1) *Who am I?*
- 2) *How am I related to Julia and Robert?*
- 3) *How do I feel about this relationship?*

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tân'si, Patricia Makokis nitisíyihkâson, onihcikiskwapiwinihk ohci nîya, ekwa ninehiyawî-wîhowin "iskwew kâtepwâtât piyesîsa." My name is Patricia Makokis. I live on Saddle Lake Cree Nation, and my ceremonial name is "woman who calls the birds." When I was given that name, the Elder who gave me that name said, "Patricia, you call much more than the birds."

I am a servant of the people! Greetings. I am honored to be a part of this "talking circle" via the newest "iron horse that sits on the table," the computer. This is a new form of talking circle, and it is with respect to our age-old form of dialoging that I have consciously and respectfully chosen to participate with my two colleagues, Dr. Julia Buchanan and Dr. Robert Donmoyer.

My educational journey with these two colleagues (whom I call dear friends now) started several years back. Julia was trying to finalize her dissertation on leadership, and, in an un-coincidental way (as the Elders would say, "Patricia, there are no coincidences!"), she was led to Blue Quills First Nation College (BQFNC), and, more specifically, to me. So, to provide a little more detail on who I am, I need to step back and reframe the current educational context between Julia, Robert, and myself.

I am an Indigenous educator; I have worked at a First Nations college located in northeastern Canada. BQFNC is the first locally controlled Indigenous institute in Canada. The college is located in a former Roman Catholic residential school. In the early 1970s, the local Indigenous Nations decided to have a "sit-in," protesting for the right to educate their own children, as few students were graduating with a high school diploma. This is very important information as it sets the context of our current post-secondary history, and, more importantly, as one of the first "decolonizing Indigenous educational centers" in Canada. This history and the current context contributed to Julia's trek north.

Who am I in the context of this decolonizing educational journey at BQFNC? Well, first and foremost, I am a Cree woman; I am a wife (married to Eugene); I am a mother (to Janice and James); I am a daughter (to my mother and late father); I am a sister (to my five brothers); I am a friend; I am a colleague; I also am an educational warrior and a lifelong learner of my own Indigenous Cree ancestry. Thus I am a baby in kindergarten on this lifelong learning journey that our Elders speak of.

I am a humble servant of the People! I am a graduate of BQFNC; back in the early 1970s, after the educational takeover, I started my post-secondary education at BQFNC. Thus, Blue Quills First Nation College runs deep in my veins.

I am, in fact, an instrument of the Cree Nation decolonization journey, and I am committed to the “cause” of helping others on the decolonization journey. That decolonization journey includes taking allies along with me on the journey ... thus my involvement with Julia and Robert.

So, when Julia contacted me when I was going to the University of San Diego to receive an alumni award, I agreed to meet with her. We met; we had coffee together; we talked. I wanted to physically see this woman who wanted to learn about Indigenous leadership, I wanted to see how I “felt” about our meeting, and I wanted to see if she was serious enough to come and visit us, on our territory. And, yes, I “felt” good; the Elders say we learn with both our head and our heart, so I listened, I observed, and I invited Julia to visit Blue Quills First Nation College. I thought, “If she seriously wants to learn, she will take the time and spend the money to come and visit.”

I invited her to stay at my house, to meet my family. It was an opportunity for us, my colleagues and me, to learn about *who Julia was*. You see, in our world, relational leadership is very important. Too often, Caucasian people have come in, taken, and left ... and they leave with our information and have not taken the time to learn more about who we are and our “worldview.” Yes, *our* worldview ... not impose theirs, but learn from us, take the time to come visit, learn, listen, share; and Julia came.

So, I felt good about our initial contact. I prayed about our relationship, and that I would feel a connection with Julia, that she would open her mind and her heart to us ... to learning about who we are as professionals working in an Indigenous college setting. This was the start of our collective learning journey ...

Ay ay! Thank you for “listening.”

Round Two

(At the start of the “talking” circle’s second round, both Julia and Robert deviated from the designated topic—a frequent occurrence in the talking circles the three of us had participated in—to acknowledge that each had ignored the traditional talking-circle protocol of, first, talking about one’s lineage and cultural background. Julia, then, attempted to mimic what Patricia had done at the beginning of her first-round comments and discussed what she knew [in some cases, very little] about her German relatives on one side of her family and the Scotch and Irish relatives on the other side. She concluded her sharing of personal information by writing,

"I can hear my mother's voice saying, 'Don't be so familiar.'" Julia then continued to tell her version of the access story.)

Julia: After I sent the email, I received a thank-you email from both Patricia and Leona. I said some prayers, and then I waited. Months went by. I tried to restart our email exchanges, but there was no response. So, I waited. Eventually, I went to seek counsel from Robert, and we started to consider a Plan B for a dissertation proposal. Any Plan B we came up with just didn't seem right, however. So, I waited.

In time I did pursue getting access to other Native American participants through Native acquaintances and connections, but nothing solid materialized. I wrote another email message offering to call (on my dime) Patricia and Leona, but didn't receive a response. One day, another doctoral student who worked in our school's international office—and, also, knew the access difficulties I was experiencing—said, "Do you know the Makokis sisters [*sic*] are in town to receive an alumni award? I have their cell phone numbers right here." I took the numbers and decided I would make contact the next day.

The following day I dialed Patricia's numbers and heard Patricia's kind but direct voice on the other end. I immediately liked Patricia. Patricia agreed to meet for coffee near the University. We had a great conversation, and I felt like I had known her for a long time, even though, of course, I hadn't.

During our conversation, I made sure I dropped the fact that I had read Smith's (1999) *Decolonizing Methodologies*. Patricia seemed pleased. Toward the end of the conversation, Patricia invited me to visit Blue Quills First Nation College and engage in some of their cultural experiences. I said, "Yes, I would love to visit." And then I waited.

(Robert also began his second-round comments by acknowledging and attempting to correct the breach of talking-circle protocol in his first-round comments. As he talked about his relatives and the culture that had socialized him, however, it became readily apparent that his relationship with his Pennsylvania Dutch culture was radically different than the relationship Patricia had with Cree culture. At one point, he wrote, "Early on, I became more than a little skeptical of what cultural socialization leads to. Indeed, had I not moved away from the culture I grew up in—metaphorically, but also literally—I almost certainly would have had little interest in a topic like Indigenous leadership [or Indigenous anything, for that matter], except, maybe, to view, from a distance, the exotic dances and colorful costumes of Indigenous groups." He then returned to telling his version of the access story.)

Robert: Initially, there were some hopeful moments. For example, Julia being invited to visit the Cree college and, after the visit, Julia telling me the visit went well. She even stayed in Patricia's home. But after the visit, she heard nothing.

Eventually, I became impatient, in part because I knew Julia's job at another university was in jeopardy if she did not complete her doctoral program within a specified period of time. I urged Julia to let Patricia know the seriousness of the situation, but Julia did not take my advice. By then, I think she had begun to assimilate aspects of Cree culture (at least the Cree culture at Blue Quills First Nation College). She had accepted Patricia's notion that things would happen when they were supposed to happen (and if they should happen). And she had learned to be respectful when one is an interloper in another's culture, a lesson I still had to learn.

Patricia: Okay, in my second round of this talking-circle dialogue via the iron horse (i.e., the laptop) that sits on my desk, I will go backwards to respond to the two questions addressed, at least implicitly, by Julia and Robert:

- What is leadership and how am I connected to it?
- Why the interest in Indigenous views of leadership?

They started by addressing these two very specific leadership-related questions, while I started with a little information about "who I am." I started as I did because, from an Indigenous perspective, it is important that we "position" or "contextualize" who we are in our work and in our relationships, including any partnerships we form. This is likely to seem strange to those operating in the Western world of work, for they tend to stay in the head, to intellectualize, and might say, for example, "I AM PATRICIA MAKOKIS, AND I AM THE PRESIDENT OF BLUE QUILLS FIRST NATIONS COLLEGE." In other words, they state their name and they identify themselves by the positional leadership place in which they sit, and this is contrary to how we position ourselves. (I might add there is nothing wrong with this. Problems arise, however, when people fail to understand that how they see—and live in—the world isn't how others see and live in the world.)

Rather than defining ourselves by the positions we hold, we identify ourselves more holistically, speaking a little about who we are mentally, emotionally, spiritually, and physically (or, in Cree, as a *nehiyaw*, i.e., a four-directional person). All of this signifies that I am connected to much more than simply my brain; rather, I am interconnected holistically to four aspects of self, or, to get a bit more complicated, as well as philosophical and spiritual—I am connected to my relatives, the four-legged

ones (i.e., animals), the plants, the winged ones (birds), that is, to all those that walk and those that crawl, those that swim, and the plants.

So, from this larger interconnected space in which I live, I am but a small, humble human being. If I were to leave this world tomorrow, my positional leadership place as President of a First Nations college is really insignificant in relation to my leadership place within this larger cosmos I speak of. Life will go on (as my plant, animal, and water-based relatives will live on) without me. But I cannot live on without them! This is a sad reality from the Western perspective which sees man as superior and ruler over all things. In our worldview, however, I am small, fragile.

I am, in fact, no more than a speck of dust in my relationships to all things around me. I am dependent upon my relatives in the water, the water itself, the air, and those that fly in the air. They look after me, they sustain me; therefore, in my leadership role, I am dependent upon them as they give me life and allow me to do my small leadership role in the larger context.

This philosophical and spiritual understanding informs my leadership practice. So when I awake in the morning, I give thanks to all of my relatives, and to the fact that I am loaned another day to serve my people, the Cree of Northern Canada. Yes, I am loaned this day, and, therefore, in my leadership practice, I must remember that my leadership actions today impact seven generations ahead, and those of my Ancestors impact me and bring me to where I am today. Thus I am interconnected with huge leadership responsibilities that are far more complex than simply the “individual” that I am, because I have “collective” leadership responsibilities that far exceed me as the small, humble, fragile human being that I am. Thus, when I practice leadership, it is for the greater good, the collective.

The graphic below adapted from my dissertation (Makokis, 2000) depicts the “interconnectedness” I speak of. It depicts my relationship to the trees, who teach me about honesty, as they stand straight and tall; the mountains (rock) that teach me about strength and determination; the grasses that we stomp on, we cut, we walk all over—they teach me about kindness as they continue to grow despite what I do to them; and to the animals, who give their lives so I have life, so I have food! What a blessing.

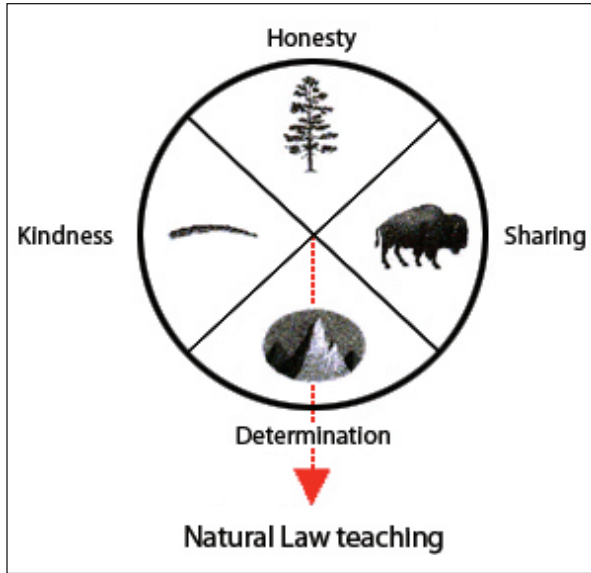


Fig. 1: Natural law teachings

Also a blessing is the interconnectedness to my relatives, my land-based teachers who share oral history about the time prior to colonial contact. The synergistic interconnectedness of my land based-relatives keeps me humble and a servant to the people, for I am connected to all of my relatives. The Natural Laws graphically shared here articulate the values—the guiding principles of practicing what some have called *servant leadership* (Greenleaf, 2008).

In the Western world, what I did by starting with a little information about who I am is unusual, for, from a professional standpoint, “who I am” really doesn’t matter. Since I am hired to do a job, I should keep myself safe within that intellectual context, because, in that context, I do not have to feel and express emotion as I am simply using my head, the intellectual part of myself. One of my Elder mentors always says, “The hardest journey is the four to six inches from our head to our hearts.” So, in a nutshell, that is one little lesson about differences in how we get into the complex topic of dialoguing around “relational leadership,” for example.

For the most part, Indigenous people—our history and our way of living and being in the world—have been seen as “inferior, heathen, savage, and in need of change.” Thus the Indian Agent was sent out to assimilate us into mainstream culture and “take the Indian out of the Indian,” as the late Elder Joe P. Cardinal from Saddle Lake Cree Nation once put it. The irony is that Western concepts of leadership that include

hierarchical structures and power sources are also proving to be complex and maybe not always the “best way,” as Western leadership authors like Ken Blanchard (2009) and others are realizing. After all, there is an “emotional” aspect to good servant leaders; consequently, relying on “positional power” may not be the “best” way to lead.

To conclude for now, I want to simply say that worldviews are unique. No worldview is better than another; they simply are different. Complexity and conflict arise when each of us defines leadership for others from our worldview, and we end up with confused states of being and poor “relational leadership.” AY AY, thank you for listening to me, all my relations.

Round Three

Julia: Thank you, Patricia, for sharing the Natural Law Teachings. Among other things, you have said that animals are teachers. This week, as I was thinking about my latest contribution to our talking circle discussion, I tried to be a good student and learn from an animal who came into my life for a bit. Way too early, before the sun was even up, I heard a strange noise. I looked out the window and saw a raccoon. I watched him high in the tree; he wanted to get down. Each time as his weight went over the side of the branch and his last foot almost let go, he would reconsider and go right back up. He must have tried 27 times before he finally succeeded.

I could not help but think the raccoon’s demonstration of persistence somehow mirrored my dissertation experience, an experience I have had to relive a bit as a result of working on this project. Now, as I sit and think about the experience, and the relationships that were formed as part of the experience, I realize how transformational this work has been. My mind is much more open to different worldviews, and it is becoming easier to critique the assumptions about research that are embedded in the Western worldview.

Undoubtedly, this work was so personally transformational because Patricia and others expected that the study would be done using an Indigenous methodology. Indigenous methodology, according to Cree scholar Sean Wilson (2008), requires reexamining the boundaries between the researcher and the researched and viewing those who traditionally are seen as research *subjects* as coresearchers. Indigenous methodology also emphasizes establishing close ties among those involved in a coresearcher relationship. Among other things, relationships help

increase the likelihood that Indigenous people will not be exploited by researchers (especially Western researchers) as they often have been in the past (Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). Wilson and others refer to this as *relational accountability*.

Given Indigenous methodology's emphasis on establishing a close coresearcher relationship, it is hardly surprising that the experience I had was personally transformational. Whenever coresearchers come from different cultures and, consequently, see the world differently, some degree of transformation must occur to establish a functional coresearcher relationship.

For me, at least, personal relationships began to develop in earnest several months after Patricia and I met in a San Diego coffee shop. Immediately after that meeting, I sent Patricia a one-page description of the research I wanted to do. She had promised to circulate anything I sent her throughout the Blue Quills First Nation College community and emphasized that a decision to allow me to do my study would be a collective decision with her colleagues.

After several months of waiting with little communication, things suddenly moved quickly. Patricia sent me an email that said that she was able to confer with her colleagues and that "it's a go" for a visit. She said to come during an upcoming gathering of Indigenous Western-educated physicians and Indigenous healers during which I would be able to interact with the people at BQFNC. Two weeks later, I was sitting on a plane heading north. I assumed that, by the time I headed home, whether or not I had permission to do my study would be clear. Things didn't happen as planned (or, to be more precise, as I planned).

Patricia had invited me to stay at her home, in part so I could meet her family. I wondered: Where did Patricia live; how would I get around? I vowed to let go of my inner "control freak." I decided to find a good leadership book that I could bring as a gift to thank Patricia for inviting me to stay with her. I also found three boxes of beautiful and quite artistic Native American-made note cards and threw them in my luggage, just in case I needed them.

Patricia was waiting for me at the airport and knew exactly where I would be walking out of customs. She had driven two hours to pick me up, and we talked all through the two-hour drive back to her home. I was humbled by her willingness to drive all that distance to pick up a mere "doc" student who was asking for a favor.

When I arrived at Patricia's home, I discovered she was also hosting three female Elders from Rocky Boy Reservation in Montana. They all sat around the kitchen table speaking in Cree; they were telling stories, telling jokes, and laughing.

The three Elders virtually adopted me. They took me to the different events in their car, made sure I knew protocols (such as walking in the correct direction inside the teepee and wearing a long skirt or wrap), and translated their jokes and stories into English for my benefit. Patricia made me feel very welcome in her home, but the Elders took such great care of me that I suspect, at some point, Patricia must have wondered, "Where is Julia?"

The Elders referred to themselves as *the Golden Girls*. The name came from an American television series about three lovable older women who were friends. I thought it was such a coincidence that I had exactly three gifts in my luggage to give to these three wonderful Elders who were so generous with me. Later, Patricia reminded me that there are no coincidences.

In time I realized that, if I wanted to get permission to do my study, the Golden Girls were not the only individuals I needed to get to know. Patricia, in fact, reminded me to make sure that I shared information about myself and why I was there during the talking circle. Up to that point, I had been quiet during circle time. I was quiet, in part, because I am an introvert. However, I also was quiet because of my whiteness. I wanted to make sure that I behaved in a humble way and that I, in no way, exhibited the sorts of behaviors associated with white privilege (see McIntosh, 1989; Regan, 2005).

The day after Patricia had prodded me to speak up, I found the right time in the talking circle to share information about myself and the research I wanted to do. Over the course of the conference, I met and made many new friends and had a chance to engage with others over meals, through listening during talking circles, and during teachings. I learned that my new Cree friends were more generous, hospitable, and funny than I could have ever imagined before I met them.

Not all experiences were positive during my first visit to Blue Quills First Nation College, however. I also learned of the wounds and pain of the past that still existed in the present at the former residential school that is now Blue Quills First Nation College. As I was sitting next to one of the teepees on the college grounds one evening around dusk, a man drove up in a pickup truck and came over to ask me about the event that was happening there. He told me he had attended the Residential School as a child. As he talked about his childhood experiences, I could see the trauma of the past in

his eyes. I knew it must have been hard for him to be near the building that held bad memories for him.

This experience helped me realize *what* I was asking of Patricia and her colleagues (who were also her friends) to do. It also helped me understand why, after a long-anticipated visit during which I met wonderful new friends, I was returning to the States without knowing whether or not I had permission to do the study.

Robert: Patricia's second contribution to this talking circle discussion—in particular, her discussion of differing cultural worldviews—reminds me that no matter how often I might visit the Blue Quills First Nation College and the reserve associated with it, I can never completely check my own cultural assumptions at the Reserve's borders. After all, I have been socialized not just by Western culture, but by Western *academic* culture. I have been socialized, in other words, to believe it is the mind that matters. (Thanks a lot, Plato!) Because of this socialization, I will always be, at best, a cultural impostor when I visit the reserve at Saddle Lake and Blue Quills First Nation College.

Still, like Julia, I *love* to visit. Last year, Julia and I brought a group of PhD and MA students enrolled in an international studies course to the Cree Nation territory to participate in the College's annual "Culture Camp." We constructed (and some of us slept in) teepees; we tried our hand at native crafts; we listened to teachings and participated in ceremonies. It was an exhilarating experience!

We came to Culture Camp, in part, because one of the conditions of Julia getting access to BQFNC for data collection purposes in her dissertation study was that the study would not be a one-shot deal. (Indigenous communities, we were told, are tired of Western researchers who "take the data and run.") Rather, Julia's study needed to be the start of a long-term relationship. The international studies course was a first step in fulfilling our part of the informal agreement. (The writing of this paper, incidentally, is a second step.)

The hardest thing for the students we took to Culture Camp—and, also, at times for Julia and me—has been not to romanticize what we saw and not to mentally transform the people we met into some sort of exotic and alluring "other" who inhabit an entirely different universe than the one we live in. To be sure, I take seriously Patricia's talk of differing worldviews. But I also have observed ways of operating that seemed quite familiar to me. Patricia's diplomatic skills, for example, would be highly valued in the West.

I encountered Patricia, the diplomat, on a number of occasions. Soon after I met her, in fact, I told Patricia a story about myself that intentionally demonstrated how naive I had been about Indigenous culture, and, more specifically, Indigenous approaches to research. The story involved me seeing a presentation about an Indigenous research study by Russell Bishop, the Maori researcher from New Zealand. Later, I had told Julia and others that I really did not see how what they had done in their study was any different than what most qualitative researchers do. The only difference that was visible to me, at least, was that they had brought an Elder with them and the research team sang a song with the Elder at the beginning of the presentation. But, *other than that*, there was no difference.

Of course, in an Indigenous culture in which ceremony is a central part of life, the *“that”* in the phrase *“other than that”* is highly significant. Among other things, it speaks to the respect that Russell had for the people he interacted with and the coresearcher relationship he had established with them. By the time I told Patricia the story, I understood all of this and, in fact, the point of my story was to demonstrate how ignorant and foolish I had been. Julia, who was present when I told the story to Patricia, laughed at me, as I anticipated (and hoped) she *and Patricia* would do. But Patricia only nodded politely.

Much later, Julia and I were staying in Patricia’s house on the reserve and I repeated my story. By now, Patricia knew who she was dealing with. This time Patricia guffawed at my foolishness. The diplomat knew me well enough by then to understand that laughter was the reaction I expected, and she happily—and quite sincerely—obliged.

Are the diplomatic skills I observed Cree? Are they skills picked up by interacting with mainstream Canadian and United States culture? Are they, in some respects, universal? I do not yet know the answers to these questions. But I do know that the diplomatic acumen I observed quite frequently when I visited Blue Quills First Nation College felt awfully familiar.

Patricia: In this round, I want to share a leadership story. Specifically, I want to share an account of a recent business meeting with two oil-business executives I hosted at BQFNC. We met to discuss possible training-industry partnerships, so the meeting had potential fiscal implications for the college.

Our protocol, regardless of who we are meeting with, is to start any meeting with our own smudges³ and a prayer. I explained to the two Caucasian businessmen that the plants are our relatives and we are burning a plant (in this case, sage) as a way of

cleansing ourselves to prepare for the meeting we are about to participate in (see the photo below.)



Fig. 2: Burning a plant for the cleansing ceremony

Then I had a male colleague (who also happened to be Caucasian) light the smudge and bring it to me. I started by smudging first, and while I was smudging I was teaching them the importance of participating in this **ceremony** PRIOR to starting our business meeting. With the smudge burning, I started by waving the smoke over my **hands** so I remember to “**do good with my hands.**” I smudged my **eyes** stating that, according to the teachings of our Elders, we are smudging our **eyes** so we “**see**” the goodness in those present. We smudge our **ears** so we “**hear**” goodness in the meeting we are about to embark on. We smudge our **mouth** so we “**speak**” with goodness in our meeting. We smudge our **heart** so we “**feel**” goodness, and remember to connect our head and our heart in our relationships.

I can only assume this was a uniquely different business experience for our visitors from the oil company. After all, in Western business, “time is money.” Indeed, anywhere else, what we do at Blue Quills First Nation College might be seen as “unorthodox” business practices. Not so at BQFNC where we are continuously decolonizing and reclaiming our own ways of knowing in all our relationships. So, we all smudge, and, that day, the two businessmen smudged; we said the prayer; then we proceeded with business.

Round Four

Julia: Thank you, Patricia, for sharing the story and also describing the smudge ceremony process and its meaning. I recall being a bit nervous the first time I was invited to smudge before a talking circle. Later, when I got past my am-I-doing-it-right concerns, I realized that the ceremony helped me to become very present (i.e., psychologically present, to the people in the circle and to the talking circle process).

During a number of visits, I participated in multiple talking circles, and by my second visit, I had learned that, in this culture, relationships mattered. During my second visit, Patricia asked me to review the Blue Quills First Nation College (2009) policies on research ethics. (In United States universities like the one I attended, these would be called Institutional Review Board [IRB] policies.) The policies were thorough and clearly signaled that forming relationships was a way to humanize the research process and protect members of the Cree community. This emphasis on relationships forced me to ask myself whether I could live up to the expectations so clearly laid out in the ethics policies. After all, I was studying at a Western institution that emphasized the need to keep distance (objectivity) between the researcher and the researched. Even the anthropologists I had studied recommended against “going *too* native.”

Patricia and Leona, my two major contacts, mentioned during my visit that if any research was to happen, the research would have to be done with Indigenous methodology. I thought to myself, “What is Indigenous methodology?”

After I returned home, I read and learned. My rereading of Smith (1999), for example, reminded me that any research that was done with an Indigenous group needed to be beneficial to them and not just advance the career of the researcher. “What would the benefits of my project be for the people at Blue Quills First Nation College?” I asked myself. I had difficulty generating a satisfactory answer, but I had come to realize that an answer should have something to do with relationships and that relationships are a source of reconciliation and humanization.

I continued to send emails now and then. Every time I wrote, I tried to signal that I wanted to be helpful, even though I was not quite sure what that meant. At the very least, I tried not to be annoying. I told myself, “Be patient!” By now I had learned that, in the Cree world, if things were meant to happen, they would happen.

After months of waiting, I started the difficult emotional process of facing the fact that perhaps this research would not happen. After all, some pretty awful things have happened in the name of research with Native people, so I thought, maybe, after over two years of searching and waiting, I would need to just let go. I dreaded the conversation with Robert, because I knew we would both be disappointed. I decided to send another email to find out if there was any interest in collaborating on the research before I faced up to the conversation with Robert.

In response to this email, Patricia once again encouraged her colleagues to consider my request to do the study so she could give me some sort of answer. The timing, as it turned out, was fortuitous. One of the Blue Quills First Nation College faculty members had recently traveled to Ghana for a meeting of Indigenous people from around the world. She told her colleagues upon her return to Blue Quills First Nation College that, during her experience in Ghana, she needed to explain constantly that she was not Western, not an American or a Canadian like other Americans or Canadians. Rather, she was First Nation—Cree. She needed to explain because people in Ghana did not know the story of her people. Because of this, she said to Patricia, “Tell Julia to come; we need to get our story out there.” Others agreed.

This paper is a modest attempt at “getting the story out there!”

Postscript

One of the reviewers of this paper seemed genuinely confused about what we hoped readers would learn from reading the paper. We actually had two a priori goals. One was methodological: We wanted to explore the utility of employing talking circle-inspired procedures as research strategies. The other was substantive: We wanted to discuss, in intentionally personal ways, a topic that has been discussed more abstractly and procedurally in the literature: doing research in a just and fair way when there is a power differential between the researcher and those the researcher is studying. The reader will have to assess whether we accomplished these goals and, if so, whether what we accomplished was worthwhile.

From the start, however, we also thought of talking circles as something akin to Western curriculum theorist Elliot Eisner’s (1979) *expressive activities*. According to Eisner, an expressive activity is a rich encounter that different people will learn different things from depending on what they bring to the encounter.

Because what one gets is contingent on what one brings, the contribution of an expressive activity cannot be predicted in advance. And because our expressive activity is appearing in a journal and not a classroom where ex post facto assessment can occur, we are not even in a position to assess after the fact what readers learned from our talking circle-inspired discussion.

We can, of course, detail some of the things we, the participants, learned. We now, for example, each have a better understanding of what others were thinking and why others acted as they did during the access process. These matters often mystified us as they were occurring.

And, consistent with what sometimes happens when participating in traditional talking circles, we also learned things that had little or nothing to do with the articulated topic. Patricia's ontologically oriented description of her thinking about leadership in Round 2, for example, helped one of us, for the first time, distinguish between Indigenous views of leadership and Greenleaf's (2008) servant leadership. Furthermore, the failure of the two non-Indigenous participants to begin their initial contributions to the talking circle-inspired discussion in a way that was consistent with talking circle protocol is a reminder of the difficulty in working cross-culturally, despite the best of intentions. In addition, the two non-Indigenous participants' self-conscious attempts at the beginning of Round 2 to rectify their oversights and talk about their cultural backgrounds, much as Patricia had done in Round 1, are reminders that different cultures socialize members in different ways and these different ways can be at least somewhat incommensurable.

Ultimately, of course, what really matters with a published article is what readers learn, and, as we indicated, this question cannot be answered by us at this point in time. Those who organize any kind of expressive activity can only hope that something of value will occur. That was our hope for readers when we opted to use a talking circle-inspired format to explore access issues ... and a bit more.

Notes

1. To be consistent with the egalitarian nature of the talking circle process that was adapted to develop and present this paper, the authors used the convention of listing their names in alphabetical order. The order, in short, does not indicate first, second, and third authorship. Also note that, at the time this paper was written, Patricia Makokis was President of Blue Quills First Nations College. She is now Indigenous Engagement Research Scholar at the University of Alberta.
2. The description of the talking circle process may not be appropriate for all Indigenous groups.
3. A smudge is a cleansing ceremony.

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Access Stories ... and a Bit More: A Talking Circle Inspired Discussion

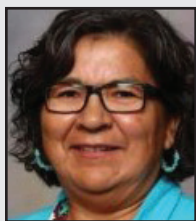
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Patricia Makokis, EdD, is recognized as one of Canada’s most outstanding Aboriginal leaders. She is an author, speaker, and a pioneer for Aboriginal education, health, and values. Patricia is the recipient of innumerable awards for her exceptional work in advancing opportunities for her people. She was awarded the Queen’s Golden Jubilee Metal Award and the Distinguished Alumni Award from the University of San Diego, amongst others. Patricia has a Doctorate in Education (EdD), with a major in leadership, from the University of San Diego. Dr. Makokis formerly served as a faculty member and President of Blue Quills First Nations College and now works as Indigenous Engagement Research Scholar at the University of Alberta.