

Conference Call for Paper – MSVU CASAE Regional Conference

“Fostering Socially Just Education Initiatives Among the Mi’kmaq and Settlers”

This paper presentation will demonstrate how the principles of Indigenous Storywork can be used to facilitate non-Indigenous Peoples becoming allies with Indigenous Peoples. Indigenous Storywork is the process of “restorying,” or retelling the dominant historical narratives of a region’s history from an Indigenous perspective. This technique introduces a decolonizing space that makes room for the inclusion of the history and narrative of the L’nu or Mi’kmaw in Mi’kma’ki in Nova Scotia.

This presentation will be a personal account of my journey to rebuild relationships between myself and the Mi’kmaq. This process started me on a path of unpacking my own Eurocentric and colonial personal ancestry. My work serves as an example for other non-Indigenous Peoples on how to build relationships with Indigenous Peoples, like the Mi’kmaq, and demonstrates how settlers can support their local Indigenous communities. This study provides a tool for educators interested in beginning the decolonizing process for themselves, their students, classrooms, school, community and so forth.

This study aligns with Indigenous scholar Marie Battiste’s work in an attempt to decolonize education, which recognizes and affirms the historical, cultural and political diversity of Indigenous Canadians whose voice has not been heard. This research follows Elder Albert Marshall’s guiding principles known as Two-Eyed Seeing for inter/trans/cross-cultural work. A key element, which respects Indigenous research methodology, is honouring Jo-ann Archibald’s (2008) Indigenous storywork principles of respect, reverence, reciprocity, responsibility, holism, synergy, and interrelatedness.

I believe that by using Indigenous Storywork, the disruption of colonial historical narratives will occur, and a more balanced, socially just story will emerge that encompasses ethical understanding. Through Indigenous epistemology, truth and reconciliation become transformational approaches for liberation, emancipatory growth and insight for both the Mi’kmaw People and non-Indigenous Peoples living in Mi’kma’ki.

Summary/Reflection of Conference

From the beginning, this new academic chapter in my life has been about grasping the constructs of relationship and research from a Mi’kmaw point of view. This way to practice research is constantly reinforced in Shawn Wilson’s (2008) work, *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*. In his book, Wilson (2008) describes the responsibility of researchers to practice relational accountability when conducting Indigenous research. Anne Bishop’s *Becoming an Ally: Breaking the Cycle of Oppression in People* (2006) has also helped me understand the concept of Indigenous allyship and how I can combine this awareness with

Wilson's (2008) conception of relational accountability (2008). Another text that has greatly influenced my scholarship is *Indigenous Story: Educating the Heart, Mind, Body and Spirit* by Jo-ann Archibald Q'um Q'um Xiiem (2008). Archibald's (2008) Indigenous Storywork principles are not just an Indigenous pedagogical tool for teaching, but have become the cornerstone for how I practice relational accountability and understanding of Indigenous allyship across all aspects of the research process in accordance with Wilson (2008) and Bishop's (2006) research.

My intent during this this regional CASAE conference presentation was to honour the value of relationship, Indigenous Storywork and Indigenous allyship as research methodologies. The conference presentation included many of my own personal experiences and stories during my educational journey. This demonstrates the various intersections between stories, relationship, and Indigenous allyship, and serves as an example of how a non-Indigenous researcher can attempt to balance and work within an Indigenous and western research framework.

Originally, Elder Joe Michael ("Elder Joe") and I were supposed to present together. However, he was unable to attend as a result of illness. Whenever feasible, Elder Joe and I have started to present together at conferences. By co-presenting, we are following Marie Battiste's (2016) principles in *Visioning a Mi'kmaw Humanities: Indigenizing the Academy*. I will speak more on the importance of indigenizing colonial spaces in other artifacts when I reflect on other conferences that Elder Joe and I have attended.

Before the conference participants arrived at the presentation, I arranged the physical set up of the room into a semi-circle. This was to make the learning space more inclusive and to foster an atmosphere of a community of scholars, as opposed to the traditional "sage on the stage" approach. Since I incorporated an Indigenous Talking Circle at the end of the presentation, it was important that I kept the presentation short to allow enough time for people to tell their stories.

Overall, the presentation was well attended and included stimulating rich discussion from the audience. Some of the audience used storytelling to convey their own struggles with concepts such as decolonization, Indigenous allyship, and their personal experiences with relationship and research. Other audience members offered advice, questions, and spoke about the quandaries settlers face when tackling the hard-colonial Canadian truths such as the legacy of residential schools and inadequacy of the Truth and Reconciliation mandate to recognize two-spirited people.

I have become aware of the importance of privileging, recognizing and naming over 5,000 culturally, linguistically distinct Indigenous groups and their territories, that comprise all of the Indigenous Peoples inhabiting Mother Earth. Therefore, when I refer to the original inhabitants of a specific geographical area, I try not to use the term Indigenous Peoples in a way that evokes colonial ideology. For example, I use the phrase "the Mi'kmaq and their unceded territory of Mi'kma'ki", rather than "the Indigenous Peoples who live in Nova Scotia."

Chelsea Vowel contends that mainstream rhetoric often uses the term Indigenous Peoples in a way that ignores the diversity among Indigenous groups and implies a homogenous whole which is tied to colonization in her book *Indigenous Writes: A Guide to First Nations, Métis, and Inuit*

Issues in Canada, (2016). Vowel (2016, p.10) maintains the term Indigenous Peoples “speaks to the incredible diversity of Indigenous Peoples as hundreds of culturally linguistic groups rather than one homogenous whole.” She argues that although it is important to understand the “collective international connotations of Indigenous Peoples throughout the world”, settlers often use this terminology to represent a global community approach to all Indigenous Peoples (2016, p. 10). Consequently, Vowel (2016) states that individual tribes and nations are often ignored and are uniformly lumped together. As a result, different Indigenous Peoples’ unique cultures, languages, identities and connections to land are ignored. Indigenous Peoples is used to represent a collective uniform mass and is a form of colonization which emphasizes erasure of the incredible diversity among Indigenous Peoples.

Since I have been contemplating the phrase Indigenous Peoples and its problematic implications, I wondered if this could also apply when using Indigenous ally as well. Ultimately, any research that I do, with and among the Mi’kmaq, is tied to broader Indigenous issues both nationally and globally. However, considering that our research takes place in Sipekne’katik, (one of the seven districts of Mi’kma’ki) wouldn’t it be more respectful if I used Mi’kmaw ally over Indigenous ally? I asked the audience their opinion about my uncertainty. A number of audience members responded and agreed that Indigenous is often understood as a pan approach with derogatory colonial assumptions and implications. One person from British Columbia said that he felt it was acceptable to use Mi’kmaw ally instead of Indigenous ally. He said that using Mi’kmaw ally implies that you are also an Indigenous ally and therefore the assumption would be that you support other nations and tribes across the country, continent and globe.

As a result of this discussion, Dr. Robert Mizzi, a professor from the University of Manitoba suggested the idea to change ally from the noun form to its verb form, allyship. He said that as a verb, allyship indicates that there is action associated with its meaning. Since allyship represents an action it is not associated with an identity as the noun ally infers. In other words, allyship becomes representative of something that someone does, not who they are. Hence, the term Indigenous allyship assumes an active responsibility which prioritizes building genuine relationships and engaging in interests and work that the Mi’kmaq recognize as important. I believe that allyship is a noun and not a verb, but I understand the point he was making and agree with it.

Another question that was asked, came from Dr. Leona English who is a professor at St. Francis of Xavier. She asked a question regarding the difference between cultural appropriation versus cultural appreciation and wanted to know how an individual discerns the difference? I explained that one action that I have taken is to use Archibald’s (2008) Storywork Principles as guidelines when participating in Indigenous culture. I also said that I ask Elders permission for almost everything I do. That said, I have made a number of mistakes along the way and have unknowingly been disrespectful. Thankfully, when I have made an error in judgement my Mi’kmaw friends sternly and lovingly correct me.

However, this question had a long-lasting impact on me. I am now constantly critically examining my own actions and questioning whether I am appreciating or potentially appropriating Mi’kmaw culture and or knowledge. A significant revelation from the weekend has been to scrutinize how everything I do, personally and academically, is ultimately tied to

settler privilege. Trying to be conscious of every action and connections to my colonial roots is a difficult process, but the process of decolonization of the self is essential, which Paulette Regan (2010) affirms in *Unsettling the settler Within: Indian Residential Schools, Truth Telling, and Reconciliation in Canada*.

References

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