

Conference Call for Paper – Atlantic Universities’ Teaching Showcase 2018: Engaging Learners Through Experiential and High Impact Practices in Higher Education

Title: Mi’kmaw Community and Knowledge Garden, Building Relationship through Experiential Learning and Scholarship at Mount Saint Vincent University

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Abstract:

The purpose of this presentation is to demonstrate how the practice of community gardening can be considered scholarly work. The focus of the project is to demonstrate how growing an Indigenous garden can be used as part of the truth and reconciliation calls to action mandate between the Mi’Kmaq and non-Indigenous Peoples living in Mi’kma’ki. This experiential way to learn is directly linked to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Calls to Action, which understands truth and reconciliation as the responsibility of all Canadians. Fostering collaborative relationships is vital between settlers and Indigenous Peoples for the truth and reconciliation process to occur.

An inspiration for creating the garden was to begin the process of building relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, staff and local Elders in an attempt to return a piece of Mi’kmaw cultural heritage to Mi’kma’ki regarding the cultural significance of gardens. Teaching and learning through revival of culture just by planting seeds, quickly expanded into growing medicinal tobacco, two types of ceremonial sage, flowering and edible plants. As well, this unique outdoor learning experience, encouraged relationship and learning experiences to be fostered between the community members of the garden and a local Mi’kmaw garden in the HRM area.

Key to this experiential learning opportunity is demonstrating that learning isn’t just about reading, researching and writing. Rather, that deep learning is a result of interactions and experiences with nature, and fellow committee members. At the end of a brief presentation, audience members will be participating in a Talking Circle, led by a Mi’kmaw Elder, to discuss our community gardening project.

Summary and Reflection:

Last spring, Dr. Sharpe and I discussed the possibility of creating a garden outside the Mount Saint Vincent University (MSVU) Aboriginal Centre. Initially we wanted to grow tobacco that we could dry and give as gifts to Elders, or use during different Indigenous ceremonies that happen on campus.

The garden quickly became a community effort on campus. Besides myself and Dr. Sharpe, Elder Joe Michael, Kathleen Arsenault, Veronica Gore, Patrick Small Legs-Nagge and his wife Karen and a few other individuals helped to make the garden become a reality.

Since Dr. Sharpe is a master gardener, our idea quickly grew (no pun intended) into a beautiful garden of three raised beds. We planted tobacco, sage, a number of vegetables, flowers and other plants that are grown locally. The MSVU maintenance and outdoor grounds staff put fresh sod

down around the area in front of the Aboriginal Centre. As well, the benches that sit in front of the Aboriginal Centre were cleaned up and given a fresh coat of paint.

Something unanticipated happened as a result of our shared community garden. As MSVU staff, students and others met and worked together the garden space became a focal point for dialogue and an informal active learning site. Part of this unique learning included the treasured experience of hearing stories and teachings from Elder Joe. In *Visioning a Mi'kmaw Humanities: Indigenizing the Academy*, Marie Battiste (2016) says that central to any Mi'kmaw learning space is listening to the teachings of an Elder who is committed to providing guidance and sharing their knowledge. Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) conveys the importance of Indigenous Elders as teachers, role models, and mentors in their communities in *Decolonizing Methodologies; Research and Indigenous Peoples*. The study, *Indigenous Elders in Residence: Growing Relationships the Elders' Way* by J. P. Lewis (2017), also confirms that Indigenous pedagogy is steeped in storytelling and oral teachings of respected Elders in community settings.

I remember one occasion in particular when we were transplanting the small delicate tobacco seedlings into larger planting trays and Elder Joe shared stories about his culture and traditional teachings. While Dr. Sharpe was giving very detailed instructions on separating and replanting the tiny fragile tobacco seedlings, Elder Joe was sharing some of his significant life experiences and how they have impacted who he is today. This community setting and experiential learning situation provided the participants a chance to learn from both western and Mi'kmaw ways of knowing.

In June I received an email for a Call for Paper for the “Atlantic Universities’ Teaching Showcase 2018: Engaging Learners Through Experiential and High Impact Practices in Higher Education. (AUTS).” I immediately thought that our garden would be a good example of experiential learning, and scholarship that is connected to relationship. The garden provided more than just the production of plants. It became a community teaching place that supported a decolonizing space to practice concepts such as Indigenous allyship, relationship and Indigenous methods for teaching such as storytelling by an Elder in an informal community setting.

The AUTS conference was the first time that Elder Joe and I presented together. We gave a brief power point presentation on the inspiration for the MSVU garden and then Elder Joe led us in a Talking Circle. Since the physical set up of the room was an auditorium with stadium style seating, we had to be very creative in figuring out how to use this constricting space. Fortunately, the chairs were not attached so we asked everyone to bring their chair down to a small area to the right of the platform where we had been presenting. Somehow it worked. There was enough space for everyone to sit and we managed to make a convoluted circle.

Despite being in a large room, with a rigid physical setup, I observed that right from the beginning, Elder Joe’s presence at the conference seemed to create a different atmosphere than if I was presenting on my own. Elder Joe’s role represented both a symbolic and real connection to Mi'kmaw ways of knowing and Mi'kmaw traditional teachings of storytelling and ceremony as pedagogy. By practicing Indigenous allyship, Elder Joe and I were able to incorporate decolonizing and indigenizing educational approaches to a very western educational environment. As a result of our spending a day together at the AUTS conference, it became

apparent to Elder Joe and I, that it was important for him and me to work together in academic settings in this way.



References:

Battiste, M. A. (Ed.). (2016). *Visioning a Mi'kmaw Humanities: Indigenizing the Academy*. Sydney, NS: Cape Breton University Press.

Lewis, J. P. (2017). Indigenous Elders In Residence: Growing Relationships The Elders' way. *Innovation in Aging*, 824-824.

Smith, L. T. (2013). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and indigenous peoples*. London, UK: Zed Books Ltd.