

**“It Makes Me Feel Good to Teach People About My Culture:”
On Collaborative Research Methods with Indigenous Young People**

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Abstract

In this article we, as settler scholars, explore process as method within a community-driven, supra-disciplinary project in southern Alberta called Raising Spirit. The project was a collaboration between the University of Lethbridge’s Institute for Child and Youth Studies and Opokaa’sin Early Intervention Society, a nonprofit that serves Indigenous children and families in southern Alberta. The project team formed in response to Opokaa’sin’s need for a digital library of Blackfoot culture, language, and history. Here, we reflect on the methods used during this project, specifically para-ethnography (Marcus & Holmes, 2008) and design studio (Rabinow, Marcus, Faubion, & Rees, 2008). Throughout, we argue that this approach produced a collective sphere (Rappaport, 2008) wherein young people and community partners, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, became collaborators throughout the process. In this space of vulnerability and potential, everyone could contribute, share, and learn.

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Mack and Newberry

Historical Anthropology 77: 76-89; Newberry (2017). "Anything can be used to stimulate child development": Early Childhood Education in Indonesia as Durable Assemblage. *Journal of Asian Studies* (76)1: 25-45; and Newberry (2014). Women and Children First: Networked Care and the Re-emergence of the Domestic Community. *TRANS: Trans –Regional and –National Studies of Southeast Asia*, Volume 2/2: 271-291.

Introduction



Figure 1. Design studio.

It was awkward to begin. I only knew some of the people we invited. It was also our first time running a design studio. We were worried we'd say the wrong thing. Whiteness makes things weird sometimes. But as we worked through the books, we found our groove together. What was supposed to be only an hour, turned into over three! I think everyone walked away having shared a bit of themselves and learned something new. I, at least, was changed in that space (Excerpt from Mack's field notes, February 3, 2017).

This article explores the methodological approach employed in a community-driven, trans-disciplinary project in southern Alberta called Raising Spirit. The project was a collaboration between the University of Lethbridge's Institute for Child and Youth Studies and Opokaa'sin Early Intervention Society, a nonprofit that serves Indigenous children and families in southern Alberta. As settler-scholars, we consider here how para-ethnographic (Marcus & Holmes, 2008) and design studio approaches (Rabinow, Marcus, Faubion, & Rees, 2008) in a digital storytelling project provided opportunities for young people (ages six to 24) to express and share their cultural knowledge with their peers and communities. Moreover, we argue that

this approach produced a collective sphere (Rappaport, 2008) wherein young people and community partners became collaborators throughout the process (see also Navia in this collection). This space was an unsettled and untheorized one and those who existed within it, in our experience, were met with feelings of vulnerability and liminality but also potential and transformation. It was also where the pains and awkwardness of refusal, which demonstrated the limits of collaborative work in the era of reconciliation, could be felt and appreciated, and ultimately revealed the power of collaboration.

Raising Spirit: Braiding Projects and Objectives

Questions about the global push to support Early Childhood Education and Care have prompted renewed attention to young children and how they are cared for and educated (Newberry, 2010, 2012; Preston, Cottrell, Pelletier, & Pearce, 2011). In this context, Tanya Pace-Crosschild (Executive Director of Opokaa'sin Early Intervention Society) and Jan Newberry (Associate Professor of Anthropology) developed a project exploring the mismatch between these policies and local childrearing practices. For the families served by Opokaa'sin, these are the practices of the Blackfoot people as well as other Indigenous groups whose childrearing practices have been violently disrupted by colonialism. How do these families understand childrearing? What counts as good parenting? What values are these practices meant to instill?

Following the work of Kärtner et al. (2007), to elicit parental ethnotheories through photographs, we used pictures of local Blackfoot people in southern Alberta engaged in childrearing as a prompt for others to describe the values that exist as every day, mundane knowledge shared informally and anecdotally. Eight parents and caregivers photographed everyday moments of childrearing. Choosing participant-photographers added a layer of data on local values as photographers were free to take pictures as they pleased although they were asked

Collaborative Research Methods

to pay attention to eating, bathing, playing, sleeping, and discipline. Two young Indigenous researchers used the photographs to interview the participant-photographers and draw out the implications of their choices. A subset of these photographs was taken to powwows in Blackfoot territory, where short interviews were conducted with self-selected passersby in response to some of the photographs. Next, interviews were conducted with Elders, recognized leaders in their community, whose wisdom is considered authoritative. Community members helped with these interviews, because of their knowledge of Blackfoot language and the protocols for speaking to Elders.

Our project has evolved since this phase. In 2015, a digital component was introduced when Opokaa'sin expressed interest in a digital resource for their programming. Opokaa'sin asked that the content consist of stories told by Elders and children about Blackfoot culture, history and language. To achieve this, the project hired three Blackfoot high school students and two Blackfoot undergraduate students to help with data collection, curation and presentation. Given their positionality, these five took on multilayered roles (Styres, Zinga, Bennett, & Bomberly, 2010) of community members and researchers, or as we call them below, para-ethnographers.

During July and August 2016, these the team embarked on cultural field trips organized through Opokaa'sin where we gathered over 100 hours of audio interviews using the original photos as prompts. Our young collaborators conducted these interviews as they took part in what was ethnographic fieldwork within their communities. Then, beginning in September 2016, a series of Elder-led storytelling sessions were filmed for inclusion in the library. After the storytelling sessions were completed, a series of art workshops were held at Opokaa'sin to allow

the children to respond to the stories. These stories – from children, community members and Elders – now fill the library.

Opokaa'sin asked that the library itself be designed to reflect the Circle of Courage (Brendtro, Van Bockern, & Brokenleg, 2002), an Indigenous representation of cultural values for childrearing used in agencies across Canada. The Circle is divided into four quadrants: belonging, mastery, generosity, and independence. The quadrants would then function like the wings of a library meant to direct users to the sorts of stories they would like to hear or watch. To make the library more locally appropriate, a group of Blackfoot Elders were asked to reflect on the values and incorporate Blackfoot words, designs and meanings. While the final product has evolved since 2010, the goals of the project remain the same: a collaborative project that highlights healthy, resilient Blackfoot families.

The Case for Digital: Methods and Products

Before we begin our exploration of the intersection between our methods, it would be beneficial to position our work within the broader context of digital methods and techniques within anthropology. Digital methods point to a variety of practices, techniques and procedures that an ethnographer might employ throughout all or part of the research (Boellstorff, Nardi, Pearce, & Taylor, 2012). These methods include how we receive data in the field, the tools we use to analyze and code that data, and how we present our findings and transmit our knowledge. Online questionnaires, computer-based coding software, and blog posts all fit within this broad category. Of course, the category of digital methods can also include audio-visual recording, as well as photography, and these are by no means new. However, with the advancement of technology, the clarity and quality of these practices have improved. While digital ethnography

Collaborative Research Methods

is firmly rooted in the traditional approaches to fieldwork, it simultaneously moves laterally to explore new ways of hearing and telling the stories of the field.

Our project employed digitally enhanced methods in the receiving and retelling stages of our process. We emphasized the use of photography and video recording in our fieldwork practices. Our field notes and observations were housed on a blog complete with tags, keywords, and searchable codes. The blog was also a shared repository for our photos and transcribed interviews. Each member of our team could comment on, and ask questions about, each post. This allowed for multiple layers of data, analysis and conversation to be braided together in a central location. Perhaps what is most strikingly digital is our ethnography, which is typically the final written work produced by an anthropologist alone. Ours, however, will be co-written in the form of a digital library filled with videos, audio, and photographs sharing the stories of the Blackfoot community.

It also seems pertinent to make the case for why we have chosen digital media in the first place. First, Opokaa'sin explicitly asked for a digital way of delivering their educational programming as a means of reaching tech-savvy young people. This is particularly relevant in the era of reconciliation, which calls for greater attention to culturally appropriate educational programming and community-driven research. Our methods, as well as our own ethics, necessitated the development of a shared research agenda. It is worth noting here that some Elders were hesitant to introduce a digital component to the programming, as it moved the process away from the face-to-face tradition. However, Opokaa'sin suggested that the benefits of the digital library would help the programming reach more Indigenous young people and thus complemented the existing approach.

Second, beyond Opokaa'sin, there is an increase in demand for digital research addressing and exploring Indigenous concerns. In 2014, the 9th annual First Nations Language Keepers Conference (FNLKC) was held to discuss and explore how to utilize technology for language preservation and promotion. Later, in 2015, the Social Science and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC, 2017) identified digital research in Indigenous communities as a future challenge area. This interest builds on a history of digital work by Indigenous communities in North America. For example, in 2000, the website FirstVoices was launched with the mission of mapping and preserving Indigenous languages in Canada. Since that time, it has archived and networked dozens of Indigenous language sites across Canada and the web.

More recently, there has been a shift to sophisticated smartphone apps and video games. In 2012, the storytelling-based video game *Never Alone (E-Line Media, n. d.)* was developed with 40 Elders, storytellers and community members from Alaska. In 2015, the Siksika Nation released a Blackfoot language app with the goal of facilitating language learning through audio, games, images and quizzes. Last year, *Honour Water (2016)*, a singing game for smartphones was released. It features songs in Anishinaabemowin, and art by Anishinaabe and Métis artist Elizabeth LaPensée. In these projects, there is an emphasis on collecting, preserving and telling stories - a collection that is often done by and for the community of intended users. Again, these projects move the traditional work of the ethnographer laterally. Here, the projects are co-theorized and co-produced by teams of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers, storytellers, artists, and programmers. The data is presented in digital mediums, rather than paper (or electronic) books, and the online distribution allows for a range of consumers to experience the content.

Para-ethnography: Fieldwork and the Voices of Young People

These projects have inspired our team to also move laterally. From the project's inception, we knew we wanted to shift how we told the stories of the community we worked with by using a digital library. However, we also wanted to transform how we accessed the stories in the first place. Here we are interested in how a para-ethnographic approach can move a project beyond the participant/researcher dichotomy, bridge the epistemological gap between community partners and post-secondary institutions, and recognize young people as collaborators.

Para-ethnography is a recent addition to the ethnographer's toolbox. The term comes to us from Holmes and Marcus (2008) out of their desire to reposition their subjects as co-theorizers. They ask, "How do we pursue our inquiry when our subjects are themselves engaged in intellectual labors that resemble approximately or are entirely indistinguishable from our own methodological practices?" (p. 595). To address this conundrum, Holmes and Marcus propose the repositioning of our subjects as collaborators. In doing so, our young people shaped our shared theoretical and methodological frameworks, and we pursued our analytical interests in tandem, sharing with each other along that process (Rappaport, 2008). Thus, our method is rooted in focusing on the research process and folding in collaborators at each stage.

Therefore, we considered the young people involved in the project to be collaborators and co-analysts, rather than simply research assistants who carried out the research plan devised by the principal investigators. What they wanted out of this project informed our research questions, objectives, motives and methods. This was also well detailed by Hauge's work in this volume where youth took ownership of their narratives and in doing so unexpectedly produced a story

that reinforced a colonial narrative (Pocahontas) and unsettled the work of scholars and agency workers.

We were also attentive to youth's right to refuse to participate in certain parts of the project or disclose aspects of their fieldwork, which we have come to understand as youth refusal (see ethnographic refusal in Simpson, 2014; Navia in this collection). The question of ethnographic refusal (see Ortner, 1995) extends our questioning of ethnographic methods, especially in the context of the young and the Indigenous. As co-analysts and collaborators, young people could define the moral contours of this form of enquiry.

When we first met our researchers, we asked what they were most interested in learning. Digital skills? Film editing? Research methods? Somewhat surprisingly, they answered that they were interested in learning about their culture. We had assumed this job offer presented an opportunity to develop job-based skills, but they saw it as an opportunity to develop cultural skills. One of our researchers remarked, "it makes me feel good to teach people about my culture" and we wanted to facilitate this experience. Thus, it was important to center this goal as we worked together to collect data for our shared objective of building a library for the young people at Opokaa'sin. This not only reflects the moral and ethical obligations of research in the era of reconciliation, it makes for better research (Rappaport, 2008), it also illustrates the pedagogical aspects of teaching ethnographic fieldwork as part of co-design and collaboration (Rabinow et al., 2008).

Additionally, we considered how the young people's own expertise in the field could facilitate the research process and contribute to a coproduction of theory and process (Rappaport, 2008). For example, when attending Sundance¹, they provided guidance on what style of

¹ Sundance is a traditional ceremony held by the Blackfoot during the summer. It is usually held in late July or early August and runs for several weeks.

clothing would be considered appropriate to wear and took the lead in initiating conversations with Elders, who shared a great deal of knowledge about Sundance and its history. After returning home from the field, we spent hours debriefing and explaining to one another what we saw, heard and felt. We theorized together about the practices we had witnessed and the values they reflected. Our debriefs existed in the collective sphere where we worked together as equals to understand our shared encounter (Rappaport, 2008, p. 6). Their voices and experiences mattered, and they informed how we approached the next day in the field. It was as if a co-training was occurring: We trained the young people in note-taking, interviewing, and participant observation. In return, they instructed us in traditional knowledge and taught us how to be participants. We gave each other a new way of looking at our fieldwork experiences from our shifting insider/outsider positions.

Following our fieldwork, we began to build the digital library. Our “construction” began on a media-rich platform where data such as video, audio, and images are layered together to tell stories using annotation. It is free, interactive, tactile, child-friendly, and available on iOS and Android devices, as well as standard web browsers. All of these functionalities were important to Opokaa’sin and the clients they service. Photos that elicited responses could be quickly uploaded to the platform along with the stories. It was simple work: Edit the audio for background noise, cut the interview so it only included the story about the photo, upload the audio file and embed it into the photo. Some photos had multiple audio files embedded in them, which would give the user a variety of voices and stories about what was going on. The simplicity of the process, we hope, will allow Opokaa’sin to continue to add to the library now that the research team has taken its leave. One goal of the project was sustainable capacity-building and it is here that continued training of youth became important.

In addition to being a simple and quick process, we found that this focus on the digital helped to center and elevate the voice of our para-ethnographers, which in turn promoted resilience and capacity through achievement and cultural literacy. We noted previously that one recurring element of para-ethnography as described by Holmes and Marcus (2008) is the elite expert, often described as adult and established within her career: A scientist or economist for example. The Blackfoot community also has its own understanding of who an expert is, namely the Elders – both aged and spiritual – though they do not refer to them as such. However possible, it was unlikely that the young people we hired as researchers would satisfy either of these categories of experts in a traditional ethnographic project or even one that employed a para-ethnographic approach. However, with the addition of a digital component, it was possible to unsettle this structure.

In 2001, Marc Prensky coined the terms “digital natives” and “digital immigrants.” He argued that there is now a generation of young people who had grown up entirely in a digital world, and our researchers are members of this generation. They have intertwined various technologies into their daily lives, including cell phones, video games, social media sites, and YouTube. They use these sites as extensions and reflections of their selves (Vodanovich, Sundaram, & Myers, 2010). For example, our researchers shared with us a variety of digital media from *Circle of the Sun* (Daly & Low, 1960), a short documentary about the Blackfoot ceremony Sundance, to makeup tutorials on YouTube. This was also demonstrated by quickly catching on to our use of blogging as a form of field notes and our computer software. As well as how we communicated as a team: Snapchat, Instagram, Facebook messenger and texting. In doing so, they demonstrated their fluency in digital communication. As a result, we feel it fair to

position our para-ethnographers as the experts in our chosen digital methods especially in moments where their ability to slip into the programs surpassed our own.

Thus, as we moved forward in the construction phase of our project, the young people continued to collaborate in digital curation process and in doing so exerted their expertise. Using their cultural knowledge gleaned throughout the summer, they made recommendations regarding structure of the library, the layers of data embedded, the file formats and types, as well as how the stories should be grouped together. This served to unsettle the adult/young person as well as expert/non-expert, insider/outsider dichotomies and to recognize the previously muted expertise of young people. By purposefully creating and recognizing this space, yet another opportunity to continue nestle this project within the collective sphere emerged.

Additionally, our collaborators spent time in July and August 2017 training other young people from Opokaa'sin in these methods of collection and curation. In doing so, we ensured that young people could maintain the library, and that it could continue to grow with new stories. We also maintained the integrity of Opokaa'sin's right to, and control of, the data in accordance with the recommendations of the Alberta First Nations Information Governance Centre (AFNIGC, n. d.), which promote the ownership, control, access and possession (OCAP) of data collected with and for Indigenous communities (see also Styres, Zinga, Bennett, & Bomberly, 2010).

Design Studios: Analysis and the Wisdom of Young People

After many photos were added with their corresponding stories, our fast-paced process came to a skidding halt. We were forced to reconsider how we might code and organize the data based on the Circle of Courage. Opokaa'sin had given us a partially formed model – it was an analytical abstraction design of sorts due to its Sioux roots – and we encountered difficulty when mapping Blackfoot practices and values into it, as they did not quite fit. Gaps manifested

between the model we were given and our understanding of the content (Schneider, 1965/2011).

Consider: Is a picture of a deer being processed an example of mastery in that the child in the image was learning a skill? Is the child learning about independence through subsistence practices? Is it an example of belonging because it was a family event? Or, because there was an expectation that the family would give some of the meat to local Elders, is it about generosity?

Digital research has a tendency towards high-speed; it is more akin to the autobahn than a rural gravel road. It also has the capacity to be simultaneously multi-sited (Marcus, 1995; Walker, 2010) and multilayered. Our research, however, needed to slow down, expand, and refocus on the intimate interactions and exchanges between our team. It needed to be more like the gravel roads we drove down as we traveled through Blackfoot territory chatting in the Opokaa'sin van about the Blackfoot hero Katoyis or the ceremonies we had witnessed at Sundance, or our plans to go sweet grass picking. To do this, we organized a series of design studios to make our analysis and coding more collaborative and conversational (Rabinow et al., 2008).

In their musings on the anthropology of the contemporary, Rabinow et al. (2008) explore how anthropology should look to fields such as architecture and design to become better collaborators. They argue that much of the research process is determined by a supervisor or a principle investigator, which not only restricts the student, team or community involved, but it also confounds the creative process. Instead, one should employ an approach wherein a group of people comes to the table to design the research process collaboratively from start to finish and revisit the design as they move through the process.

In February 2017, our research team hosted such a design studio at the University of Lethbridge. A group of young students who self-identify as Indigenous, though not necessarily

Collaborative Research Methods

Blackfoot, were invited to our lab to discuss a series of pictures. Our studio took the form of a large sheet of brown paper and photo albums from the photo-elicitation phase. One by one we went through the photographs together asking ourselves what was going on in the picture, what the values and practices were, and whether it seemed to fit best within the mastery, generosity, independence or belonging quadrants of the circle of courage.

In the end, the young people taught us how they defined these terms, and how they saw them reflected in the photographs. Their words shaped how we began to look at them as well, and how we understood the four quadrants. And we were simultaneously encouraged to reflect on our own values. Belonging became about acceptance - an acceptance by and of the community. Mastery and independence were often intertwined, and generosity was about time as much as it was about material objects.

We anticipated the studio would run for about an hour, but we became caught up in the conversations and the transformations. These studios in theory allowed us to slow down or decompress (Sopranzetti, 2014) our process and turn our process into our method. By the time they left the office we had successfully created a collective sphere. We had multiple and ever shifting world views come together to engage in a dialogue and explore what the photos meant to everyone. The reciprocal exchange was key to creating that collective sphere, or ethical space (Ermine, 2005) in which everyone walked away changed (see also Spring & Fox in this collection on transactions). The space had become liminal – a betwixt and between space which was marked by uncertainty and transformation (Turner, 1969/2008). One key marker of a liminal space is that the actors in it “elude or slip through the network of classifications that normally locate states or positions in cultural space” (Turner, 1969/2008, p. 95). We had purposefully

engaged in a process and employed a method that would unsettle these traditional categories, but now we had to develop an understanding of how and when to talk to one another in this space.

We had hoped that this space would also encourage the young people to express their traditional knowledge despite not being Elders themselves. Previously, we had found that encouraging youth to reflect on traditional values had been met with some hesitation and refusal, as the youth felt our Blackfoot researchers were testing their knowledge as an Elder might. They did not feel knowledgeable enough relative to the older youth. However, we found that white settler experiences made useful foils for articulating practices. A lack of traditional knowledge on our part also served as an opportunity to educate everyone at the table. By saying, “my family does things this way, what about yours?” or “Amy has never been to a pow wow where they did that dance, can you explain it?” it encouraged the young people to root their responses in their own experiences and see themselves as knowledgeable relative to the non-Indigenous people in the room. Additionally, it was assumed we would not know the stories and the Indigenous students would, even if they had never had the opportunities to learn them. As a result, we could “leverage whiteness” (Tanya Pace-Crosschild, personal communication, May 2017). This approach was not only effective for us with regards to analysis; it was another opportunity to fold Indigenous young people into the project and hear their voices. In the collective sphere, they could communicate their ideas about their cultures and demonstrate their knowledge. We found such success in this approach that we have replicated it over a dozen times, with university and college students, Elders and Opokaa’sin staff, and a group of youth from Opokaa’sin.

Collaboration as Discomfort and Reward

Para-ethnography and design studios, and indeed collaboration in general, are not easy methodological approaches to adopt. As Rappaport (2008) aptly concludes, true collaboration is

difficult, and it is not for every researcher or project. We discovered this when a design studio failed to establish an ethical space, and the expertise – digital and cultural – of our young researchers was not validated. They failed to acknowledge that this would be a co-creation, one that would not recognize traditional research categories. We then realized that the collective sphere could only occur if those at the table relinquished control over the project’s motives, questions, and outputs and instead shared our collaborative objectives authentically and wholeheartedly (Styres, Zinga, Bennett, & Bomberry, 2010; see also Hauge in this collection). This experience had devastating effects on the project and team and points to the difficulty of such a methodological approach.

This approach forced us to constantly reflect on our practices and experiences, our process and discomfort, our transactions and transformations, and our position as settlers and university-based researchers; as one of our researchers aptly noted, “We are all Treaty people.” It required us to be in constant dialogue with each other and with ourselves about the process: Objectives, ethics and protocol, methods, staff, content, analysis, and dissemination. The design studio became a space to share accomplishments and joy, as well as hurdles and pain. Moreover, the relationships formed out of the process have added richness to the project and to our experiences living in Blackfoot territory. These connections will continue on physically and digitally; after all, we may be leaving the ethnographic field, but we are not leaving Treaty 7.

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