



UAKN Prairie Research Centre: Learning Together: Str8Up, Oskayak High School, and the University of Saskatchewan

KEY FINDINGS

- Participants identified consistently that the emphasis on relationships and building community is one of the most significant aspects in the learning process that took place.
- Indigenous knowledge systems such as the circle model were central in structuring the teaching and learning that occurred in this research.
- Using an embodied pedagogy where participants shared their personal and lived experiences was central in gaining a true understanding of knowledge the realities expressed on the topics of justice and injustice.
- Dialogue where individual lived experiences and stories were shared were a central element to this course and in many ways formed the core “texts”. Participants noted the power of the stories that were shared and how these stories in some cases transformed their worldviews from the dominant narratives.
- Offering a culturally relevant educational space for learning was a key factor in ensuring educational success and outcomes.

INTRODUCTION

This research brief examines the project titled, *Learning Together: Str8Up, Oskayak High School, and the University of Saskatchewan* a participatory action-based research project based in Indigenous approaches that sought to bridge the divide between the university and Aboriginal communities in Saskatoon. This project brought together students from the University of Saskatchewan and students from Oskayak High School, a place that provides a safe, stable environment that enables students to experience academic success and personal healing by maintaining balance in all aspects of life: mind, body, emotion and spirit serving the Aboriginal community and members of STR8-UP, an innovative gang prevention group that supports individuals that are looking to exit the gang lifestyle. The program is the only gang intervention program in the city of Saskatoon.

To develop the thirteen-week course teaching and learning model that aims to bridge the historical and cultural divides between the community and academic groups collaboration with community facilitator, Stan Tu’Inukuafe (Oskayak High School Social Worker) and Elder, Mike Maurice was utilized. All students were brought together in a thirteen-week course on topics of justice. The class was entitled “Wahkohtowin”, which means “kinship” or “we are all related” in Cree, and covered topics on policing, the criminal trial, incarceration, and restorative/Indigenous justice. The class was informed by Indigenous and critical pedagogies and the advice of Elders and community members.

PARTNERSHIPS

STR8-UP

Oskayak High School

University of Saskatchewan

METHODOLOGY

This project expands upon the work of *Inside-Out*, a renowned prison exchange program founded in the United States in 1997 based on the notion that there is a mutual benefit when studying the justice system by those affected by the law and those studying it. In this case, the university students in Saskatoon and the community members. This model is one of community-based education. Using the model of community-based education this research draws on the critical pedagogues of Paulo Friere and Lori Pompa as the project moves the *Inside-Out* model into the community setting.

The pedagogy of this research practice was guided by Indigenous Knowledge Systems. The incorporation of smudging, art work, sharing food were all used as a means of cultural transmission which honoured the traditions of Indigenous peoples.

The methods used were qualitative with a reflexive evaluation and interview process. This research project sought to explore the following questions:

1. What kind of pedagogies bridge divides between university students and those traditionally excluded from the university in Saskatoon?
2. How can Indigenous knowledge and approaches inform an interdisciplinary class about justice?

Eleven out of the eighteen participants in the class were interviewed, the questions were geared towards looking at how the “Wahkohtowin” classroom was similar to or different from the participants’ previous educational experiences, how this approach shaped one’s learning and how the participants increased their understanding of Indigenous knowledge and contemporary issues.

MAIN FINDINGS

Initial analysis suggests several important observations:

The centrality of relationships – Participants identified consistently that the emphasis on relationships and building community as one of the most significant aspects in the learning process that took place. The concept of “Wahkohtowin”—kinship and interconnectedness were identified as a key aspect of the course and as being essential to the experiences of students in the course. True learning occurred with this model, even though this model is often over looked in the academic environment.

The importance of the circle – the model of the circle guided the work and emphasized the sharing of knowledge. The circle functioned as a structure for the class and thus brought forth a complex and deep wealth of knowledge and understanding.

Embodied pedagogy – the pedagogy was centered on the personal and lived experiences of the people in the class. Traditional university pedagogy’s tend to accept mind-body dualism, the Wahkohtowin pedagogy was an embodied one. This approach allowed for the connection of bodies and minds together, and underscored the centrality of embodied experience as a source of knowledge of justice and injustice.

Stories as core texts - Individual lived experiences and stories were central to this course and in many ways formed the core “texts”. While there were supporting legal texts and materials discussed and related, it was the real life experiences and narratives of the participants that were of true value. Participants noted the power of the stories that were shared and how these stories in some cases transformed their worldviews from the dominant narratives. In many cases it was reported that the stories and experiences went far beyond the classroom and expanded a worldview and knowledge.

CONCLUSION

The thirteen course offered the development of critical thinking skills and provided students with tools to deconstruct the very complex realities that colonialism has left behind, namely, poverty, violence, sexism and racism. The relationship-based pedagogy in the “Wahkotowin” classroom embraces and enacts this model of decolonization. The community members ensuring that the exchange was reciprocal and meaningful led the cultural practices and traditions. The model if participatory action-based research project based in Indigenous approaches that seek to bridge the divide between the university and Aboriginal communities is a successful way to engage and merge together the world of academia and community members. This project brought together the students from the University of Saskatchewan and students from the Oskayak High School, Saskatoon and former gang members from an innovative gang prevention group called STR8UP to have a deeper understanding of each other’s experience and a shared learning experience that could not be learned through standard university lectures. The pedagogy of this research practice was guided by Indigenous Knowledge Systems. The incorporation of smudging, art work, sharing food were all used as a means of cultural tranmission which honours the

traditions of Indigenous peoples. True community-based education and research was able to occur with this model.

Moving Forward:

Based on their analysis and reflections, and with the assistance of a grant from the Prairie Research Centre of the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network, they will be launching the next Phase of this project in January 2015.

For more information on this project, please visit:

<http://uakn.org/research-project/learning-together-str8up-oskayak-high-school-and-the-university-of-saskatchewan/>

An academic article was also published, please visit:

http://cijs.ca/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/IJR-4-12-Buhler_Settee_Van_Styvendale.pdf

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The Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network, the UAKN, is a community driven research network focused on the Urban Aboriginal population in Canada. The UAKN establishes a national, interdisciplinary network involving universities, community, and government partners for research, scholarship and knowledge mobilization. For more information visit: www.uakn.org



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