



## *Final Report*

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# *Learning Together: Str8Up, Oskayak High School, and the University of Saskatchewan*

## *UAKN Prairie Regional Research Centre*

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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. This research was funded by a SSHRC Partnership grant entitled Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network: research for a better life, for more information visit [www.uakn.org](http://www.uakn.org).



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## **Final Report for *Learning Together: Str8Up, Oskayak High School, and the University of Saskatchewan***

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### **Abstract:**

The goal of the current project was to learn, through a participatory action-based research project based in Indigenous approaches, about innovative and effective pedagogies that bridge divides between the university and communities traditionally excluded from it. In the past, educational practice attempted to “knock the Indian” out of Indigenous Peoples, and in the present, the academy is a largely neocolonial space, where Indigenous knowledge and epistemologies are underrepresented (Settee, 2013; Battiste, Bell and Findlay, 2002). Our project brought together students from “inside” the university (Law, Native Studies and English students) with students from Oskayak High School in Saskatoon and former gang members who are part of an innovative gang prevention group called STR8 UP in a 13-week class about the topic of “justice”. The class was entitled “Wahkohtowin,” which means “kinship” or “we are all related” in Cree. Our goal was to develop a teaching and learning model that bridges historical and cultural divides between the groups and allows them to learn from and with each other. The class ran weekly for 13 weeks from January-April, 2014. In collaboration with community facilitator Stan Tu’Inukuafe (Oskayak High School Social Worker), we facilitated individual sessions by selecting readings and activities that tapped into student knowledge and experience, and covered the topics of policing, the criminal trial, incarceration, and restorative/Indigenous justice. Classes emphasized 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. While formal academic experience varied among members of the class, the life experiences of street-involved students provided valuable knowledge, reminding traditional university students that years of formal academic experience are not the only criteria for knowledge. Following the completion of the course, we interviewed the participants in the class with the goal of understanding the impact of the class. We also completed an academic article describing and analyzing the pedagogy and approach of the class.

### **Research Questions/ Objectives:**

Our goals were multifaceted. First, we sought to develop and implement a 13-week community-based university class for students “inside” and “outside” the university about the subject of justice. The class would be informed by Indigenous and critical pedagogies and the advice of elders and community members. We then sought to undertake a reflective evaluation of the course based on our own insights, and also a qualitative study wherein we interviewed the students in the class about their experiences. The questions guiding our work include: 1. What kinds of pedagogies bridge divides between university students and those traditionally excluded from the university in Saskatoon? and 2. How can Indigenous knowledge and approaches inform an interdisciplinary class about justice?

## Literature Review/ Conceptual Framework

Our project is influenced by and expands upon the work of *Inside-Out*, a renowned prison exchange program founded in the United States in 1997. The program is “based on the simple hypothesis that incarcerated men and women and college students might mutually benefit from studying crime, justice, and related social issues together as peers” (*Inside-Out* website). Over the past fifteen years, *Inside-Out* courses have been taught in prisons throughout the United States; recently, the program moved to Canada, with the first course offered by Wilfrid Laurier at the Grand Valley Institution in 2013. The program is “not an opportunity for charity, or to ‘help’ incarcerated men and women in the sense of volunteerism or charity.” Rather, the model is one of community-based education, where “everyone serves and everyone is served.” Drawing on experiential education theory and the critical pedagogies of Paulo Freire and Lori Pompa, our current project moves the *Inside-Out* model to a community setting, proposing an exciting innovation to an international program.

Our pedagogy and research practice are informed by Indigenous Knowledge Systems, which “Aboriginal people have described with words reflecting ancient knowledge for community life, well-being and sharing values,” as Priscilla Settee explains. “In the Cree language this is called *pimatissiwian*. It is taken from the root word *pimatisi*: to be alive. A core value is *miyo-wechehtowin*, which means having good relations. Individually and collectively, people have been instructed by their teachings since time immemorial to strive and conduct themselves in ways that create positive relationships.” Our focus on relationships and relationship building reflects the UAKN’s Guiding Ethical Principles, which acknowledge that Indigenous “Knowledge may be expressed in symbols, arts, ceremonial and everyday practices, narratives, and, especially, in *relationships*” (UAKN Appendix A; emphasis ours). We incorporate smudging, art work, and sharing food as means of sharing knowledge, and a storytelling approach to transmitting culture, which honours the oral traditions of Indigenous Peoples, is an essential feature of our pedagogy. We also draw from the philosophy of Oskayak High School, which was established in 1980 as a Native Survival School by a group of parents to help students who did not cope in the regular school system; we recognize that healing must be central to the process of Aboriginal learning and also an example of how Indigenous Knowledge, Aboriginal culture, and ways of knowing become central to student activities and learning (Settee, 2011). Healing is a central component of effective learning and must be an intentional part of the student learning process (Baskin, 2005), but the healing component is not just for the injured; it is for all to realize their role in the healing and decolonization process. For Marie Battiste, “decolonization” in the context of education means fighting against the dominant assumptions that maintain power relations and Eurocentric traditions and assumptions, “disrupting those normalized discourses and singularities and allowing diverse voices and perspectives and objectives into ‘mainstream’ schooling” (Battiste, 2013, p. 106-107). At its core, decolonization requires resistance to the dominant social order and is about “creating communities, creating spaces in which Aboriginal people are safe to be Aboriginal people” (Comack et al., 2013, p. 146). Our relationship-based pedagogy in the Wahkohtowin classroom embraces and enacts this model of decolonization.

## **Methodology:**

We drew on our previous experience with Phase 1 of this project, consultations with our Elder Mike Maurice, and the expertise and knowledge of our community partner Stan Tu’Inukuafe to develop the curriculum and syllabus for our 13-week course. We then implemented the course, which involved weekly planning, facilitating and debriefing. We have analyzed and evaluated the impact of the course in two ways: first, through our own reflections and discussions among us as facilitators, and second, through a qualitative study wherein we interviewed 11 of the 18 participants in the class. Using a semi-structured format, we asked participants about their experiences in the class and what they learned about themselves and about the other students in the class. Specifically, we were interested in understanding how the Wahkohtowin classroom was similar to or different from the participants’ previous educational experiences; how the interdisciplinary approach of the Wahkohtowin classroom shaped participants’ learning; and how the participants increased their understanding of Indigenous knowledge and contemporary issues. We hired a law student to assist with an initial literature review, and another student to transcribe and assist with the initial coding of the interviews.

## **Research Findings:**

While our analysis ongoing, our initial analysis suggests several important observations about our project.

### *The centrality of relationships*

Participants consistently emphasized the emphasis on relationships and building community as one of the most significant aspects of the class. Participants commented on the importance of getting to know each other, and on the deep connection that relationship building had with the learning and knowledge production that happened in the class. We note that traditional pedagogies tend to ignore the relationships among students and the importance of these relationships to learning. Thus, our emphasis on “Wahkohtowin”—kinship and interconnectedness—was identified as a key aspect of the course and as being essential to the experiences of students in the course.

### *The importance of the circle*

Indigenous writers and teachers have emphasized the importance of the circle as a form for teaching and learning. Everyone is equidistant from the middle so there is no sense of hierarchy (Graveline, 1998; Archibald, 2008). For us, the circle functioned to provide the structure for each class: multiple rounds of discussion had the effect of bringing a complex and deep wealth of stories and knowledge “to the table.” We were then able to critically analyze the legal or literary texts relating to the topic, through the lens of the experiences shared in the circle. Students commented on the significance of the circle and the ways in which the model emphasized a sharing of knowledge. One participant noted that “knowledge could disseminate and flow from any corner and everybody had something to offer. I like that a lot because whether you pretend or not, the [standard] university system still has someone who is the boss.”

### *Embodied pedagogy*

Our participants also commented on the importance of the meal that we shared together in class each week, and how our pedagogy was centered on the personal and lived experiences of the people in the class. While traditional university pedagogies tend to accept a mind-body dualism, the Wahkohtowin pedagogy was embodied. Thus, the weekly experience of eating together as a group was a reminder that each student came to the classroom “whole” and not simply as a “disembodied spirit” (hooks, 1994, p.193). Sharing food is a central aspect of Indigenous cultural practice and was an important aspect of our gatherings. The stories participants shared each week were often about the material and painful impacts of what has been termed “law’s violence” (Sarat, 2001; Monture-Angus, 1998). For the students who did not have direct physical experiences with police, courts or prisons, we were able to observe how the bodies of certain individuals are exempted to a much greater degree from “law’s violence” – often based on privileged race or educational status. In this way, our pedagogy attempted to connect bodies and minds together, and underscored the centrality of embodied experience as source of knowledge about justice and injustice.

### *Stories as core texts*

“Stories have taught Indigenous peoples how to conduct themselves in a good way for the good of the community.... [T]hese stories, and many others yet unheard, rich sources of Indigenous knowledge, must transform the academy” (Settee, 2011, p. 436). Individual lived experiences and stories were central to course, and in many ways formed the core course “texts.” While we brought in a variety of legal and literary materials, these were always discussed in relation to the real life experiences and narratives of our participants. According to Kim Anderson, learning is best located in stories about experience. She suggests that “we can understand colonization better if we ask, ‘What does it mean in our daily lives?’” (2004, p. 125; see also Chartrand, 2012) The legal and literary texts that we read together also enriched and informed our understanding of experiences shared in the class. Participants noted the power of the stories that were shared and how these stories in some cases transformed their worldview and understanding of dominant narratives. For example, one participant stated that “this would be a class that would come up in my regular conversations throughout the week. It wasn’t just something that stayed in the classroom. It was something that is adding to my general knowledge...and expanding my view of the world.... Cause even now if I were to listen to the news...it’s got a different take on how I understand it because I can think of these other perspectives that I’ve been exposed to.”

### **Knowledge Mobilization Activities:**

We have completed an article that contains our reflections on our pedagogy, which will be published in the upcoming issue of the *Annual Review of Interdisciplinary Justice Studies* (peer reviewed).

We presented about our project at the Quality of Life Symposium in Saskatoon in May, 2014.

We presented about our project at the Canadian Association of Law Teachers conference in Winnipeg in June, 2014.

We will be presenting about this project at the upcoming Wahkohtowin conference at the University of Saskatchewan in September 2014.

We will be completing the analysis of our participant interviews soon and will publish our findings in a peer-reviewed journal.

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

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