PATHWAYS TO UNDERSTANDING:

"WÂHKÔHTOWIN" AS A RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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ABSTRACT. "Wâhkôhtowin," a Cree word meaning kinship or the state of being related, is a fundamental concept for understanding Indigenous culture and traditional beliefs (Ermine 2001). This article describes how three researchers in western Canada incorporated this concept into a research project that compared Indigenous and non–Indigenous students' memories of learning to read and write. It is argued that this concept can be used as one way of incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing within cross–cultural academic discourses and methodologies.

PISTES DE COMPRÉHENSION :
MÉTHODOLOGIE DE RECHERCHE « WÂHKÔHTOWIN »

RÉSUMÉ. Le mot cri « Wâhkôhtowin » signifiant parenté ou lien est un concept fondamental pour la compréhension de la culture autochtone et de ses croyances traditionnelles (Ermine 2001). Cet article décrit la façon dont trois chercheurs de l'Ouest canadien ont intégré ce concept dans un projet de recherche établissant une comparaison entre le rôle joué par la mémoire dans l'apprentissage de la lecture et de l'écriture chez les étudiants autochtones et non autochtones. Selon les auteurs, ce concept peut servir à intégrer des méthodes d'apprentissage autochtones dans les discours et méthodologies éducatifs interculturels.

Introduction

The purpose of this paper is to describe the research approach that three researchers and professors from the University of Regina and the First Nations University of Canada developed through a process of cross–cultural collaboration. Both of these institutions are located in Regina, the capital city of the western Canadian province of Saskatchewan. Coming from different theoretical backgrounds and levels of cultural understanding, we embarked on a research journey that sought to compare memories of learning to read and write between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students.[1] For us, this journey has been aptly described by Cajete (1994) when he equates the process of research with a "pathway":

> In traveling a pathway, we make stops, encounter and overcome obstacles, recognize and interpret signs, seek answers, and follow the tracks of those entities that have something to teach us. We create ourselves anew. *Path* denotes a structure: *Way* implies a process. (p. 55)

In terms of our own "pathway," we came together as a team to share ideas and develop a research methodology that reflected the unique partnership between our two institutions, thereby bridging the often disparate relationship between educational theories and alternate ways of knowing.

Because we were keenly aware that our research must be accountable to the participants in our project, we wanted to develop an academic discourse that valued and respected Indigenous epistemology. As a result, we based our research methodology on the concept of "wâhkôhtowin." "Wâhkôhtowin," a Cree word meaning kinship or the state of being related, is a fundamental concept for understanding Indigenous culture and traditional beliefs (Ermine 2001) because it highlights the importance of community. As Haig-Brown and Dannenmann have also experienced when working cross-culturally, "[I]ndigenous knowledge is about relationships" (2002, p. 463). In this paper, we argue that this concept can be used as one way of incorporating Indigenous ways of knowing within academic discourses and methodologies.

It is significant that this work is being done in Regina, because Regina was originally named "osk_na ka–sast_ki" by the Cree people of the area. This name, translated to English, means Pile O'Bones, a name representing the remains of the buffalo that had once been the basis of Indigenous survival and lifestyle in this region. With the destruction of the traditional ways of Indigenous life after the loss of the buffalo, the Indigenous people of this area needed a new way to survive. As a result, education became the "new buffalo" as a way of ensuring the future and survival of Indigenous people. This concept of education as a means of future survival for Indigenous people resulted in the creation of the First Nations University of Canada (originally named Saskatchewan Indian Federated College) in 1976 to allow Indigenous control over Indigenous post-secondary education. However, for this vision to unfold, it was important for us to develop and incorporate Indigenous approaches to education and research, not only for Indigenous students and scholars but also for non-Indigenous communities living beside and working with Indigenous people.

The development of this research methodology was at times challenged by both institutional structures and our own growth as a cross-cultural research team. Indeed, before we could even begin developing a methodology based on this concept of "wâhkôhtowin," we first had to examine our own assumptions and understandings. In this paper, we discuss how we addressed these challenges from theoretical and pedagogical perspectives, thereby providing

a cross-cultural research paradigm that may be useful for others interested in bridging the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous research methodologies.

"Wâhkôhtowin": Why we came together

Although our two institutions have enjoyed federated partnership[2] for 27 years, the research collaborations between the First Nations University of Canada and the University of Regina (U of R) have been few and far between. In order to promote joint research initiatives, the Indigenous People's Curriculum Project was developed in 2001 by senior administrators of both institutions who recognized the need for greater research collaboration and development of Indigenous research methodologies. Our research project about memories of learning to read and write was funded through this program. Thus, the idea of developing an Indigenous based research methodology not only informed and shaped how we envisioned the project but also affected how we grew as a strong research team.

According to recent Statistics Canada information, Saskatchewan has the highest per capita Indigenous population and is the fastest growing demographic in Canada. Aboriginal children already constitute 33% of school-age children in the province; by 2016, they will represent 46.4% of this population (Tymchak 2001). With these demographics in mind, we came together based on our mutual interests in Indigenous literacy issues and our awareness that the educational attainment levels of Indigenous students have been historically lower than those of non-Indigenous students (Battiste 2000).

Kathleen is a language arts and literacy professor in the Faculty of Education at the University of Regina. Since her students are mainly non-Indigenous and middle-class, Kathleen hoped to broaden the scope of both her own and her students' understanding of Indigenous issues in order to better prepare them for the realities of teaching in Saskatchewan schools. Angelina is a Cree professor of Education at First Nations University of Canada. She saw the project as an opportunity for her Indian education students to come to an understanding of the low levels of literacy among Indigenous peoples. Christine is a professor of mainly Indigenous students in her English classes at First Nations University of Canada. She was interested in the opportunities for critical self-reflection and the development of greater cultural awareness that the project would afford both her and her students. In short, we wanted to work together because of the need to improve language arts instruction by making our teaching practice more relevant and meaningful to Indigenous students' education. As professors, we hoped these opportunities would lead to an increased awareness and an appreciation of diversity along race, class and gender lines.

Based on our understanding of the social and political legacy of racism and colonisation within educational systems, as they have influenced the lives of so many Indigenous communities, we needed to acknowledge that we came into the project with certain biases and assumptions about the differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous educational experiences. For example, each of us assumed that most Indigenous students' memories of learning to read and write would be negative. Conversely, we thought that our non–Indigenous students' memories would be mostly positive. This project was designed, in part, to challenge and interrogate these assumptions.

We also assumed that our students would have little to no knowledge of how education as an "ideological state apparatus" (Althusser 1997; Karabel and Halsey 1977; Giroux 2001) works to sustain and promote White privilege. This use of education as a method of assimilation was most insidiously exemplified by the residential school programs and experiences of many Indigenous people in Canada from the late 1880s to the mid 1980s (Milloy 1999; Chrisjohn 1997; Miller 1996). Keeping this history in mind, we designed the project to promote greater cross-cultural understanding between students of both institutions by encouraging them (some of whom were pre-service teachers) to share autobiographical stories and memories of their past experiences with language arts. Since our memories shape and construct us (Haug 1992; O'Reilly-Scanlon, 2001), we felt it was important to provide our students with opportunities to re-evaluate and re-conceptualise the way reading and writing has affected both their educational success and personal self-esteem. Following hooks' (1988) contention that the whole purpose of remembering is to "illuminate and transform the present" (p.17), we felt the need to help our students acknowledge the inherent power within the reconstruction of their memories of learning to read and write to more clearly appreciate their own identities and roles as learners.

The following research questions provided a framework for the study:

• What is the extent to which memories of past learning experiences in the language arts shape present attitudes towards reading and writing within university classrooms?

• How do early memories of learning to read and write influence adult attitudes towards learning and/or teaching the language arts?

• How do the memories of such diverse experiences enhance or undermine effective learning experiences in language arts at the university level?

• How do memories of learning to read and write differ cross-culturally? And, by extension, how do attitudes towards the value of literacy differ cross-culturally? In other words, how have wider community attitudes towards literacy affected personal experiences with the language arts?

Narrative and memory-work

To answer these research questions, we employed Cajete's (1994) argument that "story forms the basic foundation of all human learning and teaching. Through story we explain and come to understand ourselves" (p. 68). Ultimately, from an Indigenous perspective, our stories can be the only truth and knowledge we can claim as our own. These stories can also serve as a means of decolonisation for, as McLeod argues, "[e]very time a story is told, every time one word of an Indigenous language is spoken, we are resisting the deconstruction of our collective memory" (2001, p.31). We chose to use the Indigenous research model of "research as story" as a way of integrating the Western theory of memory-work (Haug et. al. 1992) with our own understanding of the need for culturally relevant research practices. While combining Indigenous and Western theories may, on the surface, seem improbable and, in some cases, even contradictory, our experience shows that these theories are, in fact, complementary and have allowed us to explore the depths and nuances of language arts memories in a way that using only one theory could not.

One of the dilemmas of doing Indigenous research is that "the notion of a distinct research methodology for and by Indigenous people is still at the beginning stages of scholarly discourse" (Weber-Pillwax, 1999, p. 33). Historically, Indigenous research has been constructed as resistance, an "oppositional or reverse" discourse (Parry, 1994) and this approach, in itself, is limiting. Indigenous knowledge has been relegated to the periphery, and Indigenous research is about making that paradigmatic shift to more inclusive and respectful practices. Thus, Indigenous research is essentially about integrating two worldviews and philosophies; it addresses what Cajete (2000) calls the "split-headedness" of the knowledge-making process. In other words, we understood that we needed to find "the ethical space" between the two "solitudes or cultures of understanding" (Ermine, 2001). For our research team, the methodology we developed and used had to be credible and acceptable within both frameworks.

Narrative research – "research as story" – is, in many aspects, the most appropriate to Indigenous epistemology. Our use of memory-work methodology and our reliance on narrative as a way of knowing were our attempt to bridge the two perspectives. To this end, we believed that the sharing of memories in a cross-cultural context would allow our students to engage in a process of transformation and dialogue in the way that Mikhail Bakhtin (1981) describes it:

> The living utterance, having taken meaning and shape at a particular historical moment in a socially specific environment, cannot fail to brush up against thousands of living dialogic threads woven by socio-ideological consciousness around the given object of an utterance; it cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue. (p. 276)

Bakhtin's assertion that any story, any word, shared in a social situation "cannot fail to become an active participant in social dialogue" explains how this research project was an attempt to engage in a "social dialogue" through the sharing of memories of literacy development in order to increase the cross-cultural understanding of our students.

The interrogation and analysis of memories in this project are important tools for achieving such understanding. According to Halbawchs (1992), any individual act of memory takes place within a social context and can only be understood or interpreted within that context:

> There exist social frameworks for memory; it is to the degree that our individual thought places itself in these frameworks and participates in this memory that it is capable of the act of recollection. . . . No memory is possible outside frameworks used by people living in society to determine and retrieve their recollections. (pp. 38, 43)

This memory process works both ways, of course, for just as the individual requires a social framework through which to experience memory, so social or communal memory and identity depend upon individual reflection: "What we would call the collective framework of memory would then be only the result, or sum, or combination of individual recollections of many members of the same society" (Halbwachs, 1992, p. 39; McLeod, 2001). For both our Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, we hoped that sharing memories would allow them to become engaged with this "collective framework" by not only foregrounding their individual identities as they are constituted by and through memory, but also placing those individual memories in context with the memories of others. As Marcus (1994) asserts, critical self-reflection "requires response (and thus engagement) from others positioned differently" (p. 172). By reflecting on how their personal memories are, in many ways, socially constructed and socially integrated, we anticipated that the students would gain a better understanding about how their own experiences in the language arts classroom relate with others'.

Considering that many of our students' memories and experiences historically have not been validated by education systems, this project was designed to help the students develop a sense of control over and an appreciation of their own narratives. The project also asked the students to analyse their memories within the larger context of the social, racial and gendered experiences of their peers. In many Indigenous communities, the authority to speak derives from direct personal experience; as Cruikshank (1994) explains, "primary experience is the epistemological foundation of knowledge" (p. 12). The contextualisation and narrativisation of memories in this project serve to assist our students to better understand their own attitudes towards the learning of language arts.

The opportunity for dialogue was one of the most important components of this project. Since this project was designed to create a cross-cultural dialogue based on memories of learning to read and write, we followed Freire's (1985) assertion that any "cultural act for freedom is characterised by dialogue" (p. 85). Furthermore, as he argues, "there is no true word that is not at the same time a praxis. Thus, to speak a true word is to transform the world" (1972, p. 75). Indeed, in designing the project, we all recognized the opportunity for political and social transformation through memory–work and autobiographical narration. Our belief in the notion of the relationship between autobiographical narration and transformation is further supported by Langness and Frank's (1981) assertion that:

> Autobiography, at its very core, is a process of self-creation. When autobiographers are conscious of this process, they can use its power in the struggle for personal freedom. For the autobiographers, and for readers influenced by published examples of people claiming the right to define themselves, autobiography can be a revolutionary act. (p. 93)

Indigenous methodologies

Indigenous research methodologies often use personal narratives to validate the experiences and knowledge of Indigenous peoples and connect the research enterprise to Indigenous understandings (Smith, 1999). While the use of memories and narratives was a significant aspect of our study, it is equally important to appreciate that Indigenous research practices call for protocols that are different from traditional research methods. Both introspection and the development of relationships are essential attributes of the Indigenous research process; as Ermine (1995) reminds us, "Aboriginal epistemology is grounded in the self, the spirit, the unknown" (p. 108). Wilson further explains, "Indigenous research, according to Indigenous researchers, is a ceremony and must be respected as such . . . It is the knowing and respectful reinforcement that all things are related and connected . . . Indigenous research is a life-changing ceremony" (2003). Because of our awareness of this, we incorporated specific aspects of Indigenous epistemological approaches and spiritual/cultural practices as an essential part of our research methodology.

As the first step toward incorporating and understanding Indigenous epistemological approaches, we consulted with Elders from the First Nations University of Canada. The Elder we worked with most extensively was Elder Beatrice Lavallee from Piapot First Nation, who has since passed into the Spirit World. The involvement of Beatrice and other Elders and the reliance on their knowledge was key to this research if it was to be credible from an Indigenous perspective. To ensure ethical and respectful research, we began with a pipe ceremony in the fall of 2001 and, once the ethics proposal was approved, we also participated in a sweatlodge ceremony. These cer-

emonies served not only as a part of our research process, but they also afforded opportunities for our students (some of whom later became involved in our project) to participate in an Indigenous ceremony which we hoped would help build relationships between our two institutions.

The pipe ceremony and the sweatlodge ceremony laid the foundation for the project because, as previously mentioned, Indigenous research cannot be divorced from ceremony, and ceremony is an important consideration in Indigenous epistemology. While it is not appropriate to go into great detail about these ceremonies in this paper because ceremony is a sacred part of the Indigenous oral tradition, the purpose of both ceremonies is to communicate with the Spirit World so we can receive blessings. Ceremonies are opportunities for prayer, to acknowledge and ask for guidance from the Creator, and to give thanks for the gifts we have been given.

Traditionally, a pipe ceremony is used to acknowledge new beginnings and to ask for guidance and direction; for the three of us, it was a way to show our commitment to each other and to the project as we began following the path of our research journey. In this way, the pipe ceremony was the first step towards ethics approval using Indigenous research protocols. The sweatlodge ceremony served as an opportunity to strengthen our trust and bond as a research team by sharing a time of physical and spiritual exertion. The Elders say that when one goes into a sweatlodge, it is like returning to the womb to be nurtured by Mother Earth. It is a time of cleansing, a time of prayer and a time for asking for guidance from the Spirit World. Participation in the sweatlodge ceremony recognizes that "every individual [has] the capacity to make headway into knowledge through the inner world" (Ermine 1995, p. 108). Initially, we hoped that participating in the ceremonies together would help us develop as a research team by acknowledging and appreciating differences. In reality, the ceremonies did much more. They deepened our respect for one another and have sustained our commitment to further research. As our research unfolds, we have continued to participate in ceremonies to sustain and strengthen ourselves as a team.

Our participation in these ceremonies also afforded us an opportunity to educate the wider university community. Since most university institutional structures are based on Western traditional concepts of what constitutes "research," an unexpected opportunity arose for us to educate and inform our ethics board about the role of ceremony within Indigenous research practices. As part of the research process, we recognized that we had to obtain ethics approval from both of our institutions. To this end, we submitted an application to the Research Ethics Board (REB) and, at the same time, we also believed it was necessary to obtain approval and guidance from the Elders at First Nations University of Canada. Thus, we approached the pipe ceremony as a parallel way of obtaining approval for

our research project from an Indigenous perspective. Initially, the REB expressed some concern that we had perhaps pre-empted its own approval process by holding the pipe ceremony prematurely. They believed that the pipe ceremony should take place after receiving formal ethics approval. In our response to their concerns, we were able to clarify the intent and purpose of the pipe ceremony within our research methodology. As a result, we may have cleared the path to ethics approval for others engaged in similar cross-cultural research employing Indigenous ceremonies.

Putting theory into practice

We approached this project with the notion that the memory–work we would be doing in our classrooms was an essential part of the coursework regardless of whether or not the memories that resulted from the process could or would be used as part of our research. As part of regular class activities, we asked our students to record their memories. Each of us introduced the memory-work in slightly different ways according to the demographics of our students and our particular classroom contexts and environments.

As responsible researchers, we needed to be mindful that some of the students in our classes might have had negative memories of learning to read and write. We put into place support mechanisms that would assist students to cope with any negative emotional or psychological side-effects and/or discomfort. These mechanisms included access to Elders and university counseling services.

Kathleen's subjects included a total of 64 Education students. These students, mostly non-Indigenous, were second year pre-service teachers in two introductory language arts and literacy classes. To begin the process, she shared several first-person accounts of learning to read and write from a collection of school–based memories (O'Reilly-Scanlon, 1992). As part of their self-reflective practice, she then asked the pre-service teachers to recall their own memories of learning to read and write. To help with this process, she used various protocols outlined by a number of memory-work researchers (Haug, et al. 1992; Mitchell & Weber, 2000; O'Reilly-Scanlon, 2001). In subsequent classes, students analysed their memories using a framework of analyses (O'Reilly-Scanlon, 2001) comprising a series of questions that are outlined later in this paper.

Angelina's subjects included 36 Indian Education first, second and third year students in three language arts methods classes. The participants included Cree, Saulteaux, Sioux, and a handful of non-Indigenous students. Following the protocol and procedures used by Kathleen in her classes, Angelina's students were asked to reflect on their memories of learning to read and write in a writing-workshop format. Angelina also employed a

sharing circle – a safe place for students to talk about their feelings and experiences – after the memories had been written.

Christine's subjects were 38 students taking a first year English class called "Narratives of Deviance." This was a televised distance-education class delivered to fourteen sites throughout Saskatchewan to mainly Indigenous and Métis students. For Christine's students, the memory-work process was important in terms of the class theme of "deviance" since it allowed students to write personal narratives about how the education system "normalizes" learning. The memory-work allowed them to interrogate and apply the theme of deviance to their own lives and educational experiences with language arts. This connection was indeed achieved, as evident in one of Christine's student's responses to the assignment:

> To be taught to read and write was filled with nothing but punishment. I did not have a clue about English, could not speak the language let alone write it. I was punished for speaking my language, yet I could not speak any other. . . I was labeled deviant for my lack of the English language, and I was labeled deviant for my race.

Framework of analyses

In all of our classes, the students were not only asked to recall and record their memories of learning to read and write, but also asked to move beyond nostalgia by critically analysing their memories. To help guide their analyses, we used a set of questions developed by O'Reilly-Scanlon (2001). These questions included:

1. Who else might remember this incident?

2. How might they remember it?

3. Who else may have experienced the same thing? Is this memory connected to the experiences of others?

4. What kind of student is represented here?

5. What kind of teacher? Principal? Other?

6. Who is not represented?

7. Why do you think this incident was remembered?

8. In the memory, are there issues related to class? Culture? Gender? Language? Race? If so, what are they?

9. Does your narrative contain any clichés? If so, what are they? What do the clichés appear to take for granted and/or assume?

10. What can be learned from this memory?

These questions were designed to encourage students to bridge the link between their own memories and the memories of different groups of people, including those who traditionally are not represented in educational

research. The process of analysis was intended to help the students go beyond their scope of understanding based on their own experiences, in order to better appreciate how other people may have experienced learning to read and write differently. For those students who might have unearthed negative memories through these activities, the framework for analyses helped them understand how influential their memories have been in developing their own attitudes to reading and writing. For Kathleen's and Angelina's education students in particular, the analyses served to reinforce the idea of how powerful a teacher's influence may be in shaping a student's feelings of self-worth and self-confidence. For all of our students, these questions asked them to place their memories within a societal and environmental context; the analyses encouraged them to move from a highly-personal space into a larger collective framework of political, social and historical educational forces. In other words, this framework of analyses sought to move our students into the role of "committed cultural critics," by incorporating bell hooks' philosophical view that

> Committed cultural critics can produce work that opposes structures of domination by willingly interrogating their own work on aesthetic and political grounds. This interrogation becomes an act of critical intervention, fostering a fundamental attitude of vigilance rather than denial. (1990, p. 55)

Preliminary analyses

After collecting the memories from each of our classes and obtaining permission to use those memories in our project, we combined a traditional rhetorical analysis strategy with the categorical content analysis developed by Lieblich, Tuval-Mashiach and Zibar (1998) to identify emerging thematic commonalities. To initiate the process, we separated the narratives into positive and negative memory categories if the narratives lent themselves easily to this kind of distinction. From there, we identified common themes within each category.

Many of the memories focused on the relationship between memory and self-esteem. Perhaps the strongest theme of all the memories was one of "response": the teacher's response to the students' work or behaviour very much made the difference between whether the memory was positive or negative. Positive memories tended to reflect experiences of being singled out for praise, feeling a special sense of belonging, or feeling that school was fun. Negative memories tended to reflect experiences of being singled out for criticism, being shamed or humiliated, or feeling isolated. One of the most powerful narratives to express the connection between feelings of self-esteem and a teacher's response was the following poem written by a third-year First Nations University of Canada education student in Angelina's class:

Wrong Again

As the teacher walked by my desk
I smiled up at her, hoping for a little smile
Wrong again. She walked right on by.

I wrote my sentences nice and neat,
For sure I would get a gold star,
Wrong again, one word slanted.

I read out loud from Dick and Jane.
No mistakes, yes for sure a compliment.
Wrong again, I forgot to pause.

She asks a question, I raise my hand
I know this, a bear, a bear
Wrong again, it's a Polar Bear.

Maybe next year, I will be right.
Different teacher, different books, different classroom
. . . Wrong again.

Another significant theme to emerge from our preliminary analyses of the students' memories was related to the connection between family and community attitudes towards literacy and a student's own experiences of learning to read and write. Those students who had been exposed to books and literacy experiences at home before attending school were more likely to have positive memories of learning to read and write. As one of Christine's students wrote about her positive memories explained, "My *parents taught me that it was 'cool' to read.*" On the other hand, a student whose memories were negative admitted, ". . . *the lack of encouragement I received has always had an effect on my reading and writing skills. . . I think it's because nobody in my community thought it was important if you learned to read and write at that time.*"

Shortly into the preliminary analyses of our students' narratives, we began to realize that our initial assumptions about who would have positive memories and who would have negative ones were erroneous. At the beginning of the project, we all assumed that the Indigenous students would have more negative memories of learning to read and write than the non-Indigenous students. However, within each of our classes, there were both positive and negative experiences shared by students regardless of cultural background, race, class or gender. Curiously, the severity of experiences on either end of the spectrum for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students invites further critical interrogation as to how the structural factors of race, gender and class influence the ways students experience and remember their early exposure to language arts. The nature of our initial assumptions forces us to confront how such biases have been and continue to be reproduced within classrooms and institutions: How do we value knowledge? And whose knowledge do we value within our classrooms? These questions implore us to examine own blind-spots and fragility when it comes to

hearing our students' voices and stories, because we are shaped and bound by the very structures that we are interrogating through this project. As professors leading our students through the memory-work process, we explore our own roles in finding a balance between Indigenous and non-Indigenous expectations and experiences; such exploration may help us avoid the over-privileging of Western notions of education and knowledge.

It is our hope that the memory-work research methodology used in our classrooms, as well as the themes that emerge from the sharing of stories, will help us and our students identify best practices within education in concrete, experiential and contextual ways. In other words, our students, by understanding that their memories have shaped them as learners, are able to use those memories to shape and construct relevant and meaningful strategies for their own future pedagogical practices. But our students are not only the only ones to benefit from the stories that result from memory-work. We have also learned from those stories for they have informed and impacted our own classroom environments and our own approaches to teaching language arts. Through this project, we have been reminded of the importance of valuing the knowledge that students bring with them into the classroom, the importance of students feeling a sense of belonging for optimal learning, and the power of teachers in shaping students' attitudes towards themselves as learners. In addition to uncovering these best practices, this research project has been unique for its methodical approach that allows students and researchers to work through individual processes in order to benefit the larger community. We become more open to understanding the experiences of others through better understanding of ourselves and our histories.

Conclusion

As we reflect on our research collaboration, we realize the extent to which the concept of "wâhkôhtowin" has guided our steps along our research pathway. This concept best describes our commitment to go beyond personal benefit to a place of collective responsibility. Embracing "wâhkôhtowin" as a guiding principal has allowed us to form relationships based on trust, flexibility, humour, and a willingness to move beyond our personal comfort levels to a place of shared understanding and experience. In this way, we have challenged our institutions, our students, and ourselves to search for more inclusive and respectful ways of producing and valuing different definitions of what constitutes knowledge.

If the most important question we asked our students was "What did you learn from this?" then we must also ask ourselves the same. In response to the call for the development of alternative research methodologies specific to Indigenous needs, we have learned that Indigenous and non-Indigenous theoretical foundations can complement one another, but only if those

foundations are negotiated by and grounded in trusting, respectful research relationships. As we continue to be involved in cross-cultural research projects, we understand the need to be vigilant in our adoption and application of Indigenous conceptual frameworks, such as "wâhkôhtowin," that will facilitate the development of new knowledge relevant to both Indigenous communities and researchers.

NOTE

1. We use the term Indigenous to refer to the original peoples of the Americas. We understand that many labels (e.g. Indian, Native, etc.) have been attributed to the First Peoples and their descendents and that this term reflects the evolving social and political realities of these communities.

2. In May 1976 the Federation of Saskatchewan Indian Nations entered into a federation agreement with the University of Regina creating the Saskatchewan Indian Federated College. The agreement provides for an independently administered university-college, the mission of which is to serve the academic, cultural and spiritual needs of First Nations students.

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