

## First Peoples Child & Family Review

An Interdisciplinary Journal Honouring the Voices, Perspectives, and Knowledges of First Peoples through Research, Critical Analyses, Stories, Standpoints and Media Reviews

# Making Space for Community-Based Practice Experience and Spirit in the Academy: Journeying Towards the Making of an Indigenous Academic

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Volume 8, Number 2, 2013

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1071734ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1071734ar>

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### Publisher(s)

First Nations Child and Family Caring Society of Canada

### ISSN

1708-489X (print)

2293-6610 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

### Cite this article

Johnson, S. (2013). Making Space for Community-Based Practice Experience and Spirit in the Academy: Journeying Towards the Making of an Indigenous Academic. *First Peoples Child & Family Review*, 8(2), 82–90.  
<https://doi.org/10.7202/1071734ar>

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## An Interdisciplinary Journal

*Honoring the Voices, Perspectives and Knowledges of First Peoples through Research, Critical Analyses, Stories, Standpoints and Media Reviews*

# Making Space for Community-Based Practice Experience and Spirit in the Academy: Journeying Towards the Making of an Indigenous Academic

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## Abstract

*This narrative recounts four experiences of an Indigenous social work academic employed at a mainstream university in Canada. These experiences include: (1) valuing community-based practice and spiritual experiences prior to entering the academy; (2) learning in an Indigenous doctoral cohort; (3) using Indigenous knowledge during the hiring process into a tenure-track faculty position in a mainstream university; and, (4) including Indigenous knowledge to secure academic research grant applications, and to meet teaching, scholarly, and service expectations. Finally, this narrative identifies systemic academic issues from the perspectives of four other Indigenous and women academics of colour, and teachings that may assist new Indigenous faculty entering mainstream university employment.*

## Beginning in Teachings that Value Community-Based Practice and Spirit

The teachings and connections that arise when people tell stories about their lives, events, practices or ceremonies continue to fascinate and inspire me. Years ago, I used to say “I just want to talk with people and write about their stories.” A critical part of my work today, as an Indigenous academic, is listen to, and talk with people, and write about their stories. Brown (2012) calls this form of storytelling and research as “data with a soul”; while academics term it “qualitative research.” Contemporary Indigenous academics maintain that when research is conducted from Indigenous perspectives or standpoints, it’s called “Indigenist research” (Rigney, 2001); and includes perspectives that privilege tribal-based (Kovach, 2009) or ceremonial (Wilson, 2008) knowledge. According to Archibald (2008) Indigenous stories have the power to educate and heal the heart, mind, body and spirit, and she terms this pedagogical method as “storywork.” Reflecting on how teachings and learning experiences build upon each other, helps to guide Indigenous understanding about how each past event, experience, thought, dream, conversation,

ceremony and prayer is necessary, and purposeful. That Indigenous knowing is grounded in repeated knowledge shared in spiritual and cultural stories by family, friends and community. However, it wasn't always this way, because being in this place and time is an evolving dream.

Sometimes dreams include rude and abrupt awakenings, and this academic dream is no different. Upon entering academia, I was shocked to learn that my 24 years of social work practice experience counted for nothing but a few employment lines in my curriculum vitae (CV). There is nowhere in the CV to identify what or how spiritual or cultural experiences, or teachings were gained through those community-based practice or relationship-building years. There is no place to identify the skills built, knowledge learned or strength gained through difficult lessons. It is as if I entered a first employment position; and certainly one that is based on new criteria, and is enforced by White, corporate, elite power. Among this new criteria includes recounting the number of, in priority ranking: (1) solo or first authored publications in peer-reviewed journals; (2) secured Tri-Council grants; (3) courses taught at the undergraduate and graduate levels; (4) graduate student supervision; and, (5) types of service to the University, profession or community. The lesson I am learning is that although historical and holistic work practices, cultural or spiritual experiences, values and beliefs are not identified in meaningful ways in academic CV's, they support Indigenous peoples in immeasurable personal and tangible ways. One strategic way this happens is through understanding how Indigenous foundational, structural, and community support is needed, more than ever, to help Indigenous peoples work within this increasingly corporate, White, academic institution. It is difficult and challenging work for Indigenous peoples, and women in particular, because the approximately 98 publicly and privately funded universities in Canada (Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, AUCC, 2013) overwhelmingly privilege, are dominated and reinforced by, White male power, corporate, upper class, able bodied, hetero-normative perspectives. Increasingly, post-secondary institutions in Canada are confronted with private-sector, entrepreneurial funding models, and choose to align themselves with exploitive worldviews rather than holistic and community-oriented perspectives. This academic reality points to the need for a more holistic CV model or method that can better embody Indigenous experiences, both practically and personally within the academy.

It is a perspective that is recognized and affirmed by many, including former University President Dr. Ross Paul (2011) in his recent book, *Leadership Under Fire: The Challenging Role of the Canadian University President*. In it, Paul examined 47 recent presidential appointments at Canadian universities and found that while 41 came from outside the specific university of appointment, a full 85 per cent held prior senior academic administrative positions at other Canadian universities. In addition, in Canada in 2013, there is only one Indigenous President of a mainstream university; Dr. Michael DeGagné of Nipissing University in Ontario. It is important for Indigenous peoples to be aware of the myriad and intersectional challenges inherent in working in Canadian universities, and to understand the powerful reasons that keep the elite, White institutions unwilling to look outside their ranks for leadership or change. As an Indigenous woman academic, it is important for me to understand how the insularity of elite and managerial levels, increasing financial constraints, changing political and public priorities based in economic business perspectives may well contribute to the detriment of Canadian post-secondary institutions. It is a future, and an opportunity, that Indigenous peoples must be ready to address now, and in the years to come.

## Making Space for Spirit and Privileging Culture in an Indigenous Doctoral Cohort: An Indigenous Educational Experience in a Mainstream University

Prior to my doctoral experience, all but two of my Western-based academic teachers, instructors and professors were White. The two exceptions were one Indigenous sixth grade teacher from Australia, and one course in my Master of Social Work program delivered by a Cree academic. Joining an Indigenous doctoral program at the University of British Columbia (UBC) Faculty of Education was a watershed moment in my academic experience because it marked the end of 20 years of primarily White academic education. Thirteen Indigenous and two non-Indigenous doctoral students entered a 2006 cohort and were taught by Indigenous academics from Canada, Australia, New Zealand, the United States and China. It was the first time I consistently saw myself, my teachings, practices and ways of knowing modelled and reflected by Indigenous academics. The first example happened the first day of the doctoral seminar class because it was based in ceremony and immediately connected my Indigenous-self to the curriculum.

Our doctoral program began with smudging, prayers, singing, drumming and feasting. It was the day the “possibility of Indigenous education” became my “Indigenous reality.” When our first day was closing, Dr. Graham Hingangaroa Smith, a Maori academic from New Zealand, invited us to look around the room. He explained our responsibilities to help one other; to notice someone else’s struggle, to reach out to support and encourage their educational journey, and to ask for help for our own. He cautioned us to remember that if one of us fails, then we all fail. As we listened to the teaching, a sense of responsibility to our small collective settled in my mind and body. The feeling remains to this day, and is reinforced by the sense of accomplishment and joy for those that complete the program, and the sense of hope for those that are working to do so. It was also a tangible reminder that Indigenous education differs from mainstream approaches in university culture which posits that for one to do better, others must do worse. The following example provides some insight into this difference in educational approaches and occurred at the same institution.

Two months into the program, I was walking across the campus and met a friend who was already well into her first year doctoral program at the same institution. She was the only Indigenous person in her cohort, and was curious about my experience. So, I shared the story of our first day experience, and about the cultural and spiritual aspects that continue each time we gather together to learn from each other. I talked about the support we received in writing retreats, from each other, and the sense of being mentored by senior Indigenous academics like Dr. Jo-Ann Archibald (Sto:lo), Lester Irabinna Rigney (Indigenous Australian), Graham Hingangaroa Smith (Maori) and teachers such as Dr. Lee Brown (Cherokee). As she listened, she wondered aloud if she could join our cohort. When I asked about her program, she laughed and said that on her first day, the professor came into the seminar, welcomed the students to the institution, and asked them to look at one another. He said that only about 50 per cent of the students would complete the doctoral program and that if they were married or in a current relationship, about 50 per cent of them would not be in it by the end of the program. He told the students to decide which side of the 50 per cent of the program they would represent. In contrast to my welcoming and supportive

experience at the same institution, hers was not.

Unfortunately, her isolating doctoral experience is shared by many Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and many leave their programs for myriad reasons. This happened to the two non-Indigenous people that began our program. A short while into the coursework, one non-Indigenous person left for personal and family health related reasons; and another left after completing all the course work, moving to candidacy status and writing a considerable amount of the dissertation. The second person left due to what he terms the combined burden of caring for aging parents and the health of his partner. Recently he commented that pursuing a doctorate had never been his priority; rather it was the learning achieved through the doctoral courses that drew him into the program. Indigenous doctoral cohort students also experienced the death of parents and partners, personal ill health, and job changes; and through those times sought the collective interdependent support from cohort members, extended family and community members, and teachers.

Five years after beginning the Indigenous doctoral program, I was the first cohort member to defend my doctoral dissertation. It was a Friday afternoon on a long weekend; and 40 people, including family and cohort members, professors, colleagues, professionals, and students witnessed it. The defense began the same way the program began and progressed; in ceremony, with prayers, drumming and singing and it ended in a feast. It was a celebration of the most unique Indigenous educational experience of my life. One of my dreams is that one day other Indigenous doctoral students can experience an Indigenous doctoral cohort in many different faculties and that it is possible to integrate this model into mainstream universities. The proof that Indigenous worldviews, ways of knowing and being can be integrated in complementary ways is self-evident. I know it can happen at various faculties at my institution, because it happened for me, across the road from where I currently work. It does not have to be an either/or experience, it does not have to compete with mainstream ways of being; it can just “be”.

## **Narratives as Spiritual Stories Designed to Encourage and Prepare: Being Hired into a Tenure-Track Faculty Position in a Mainstream Canadian University**

Of the 40 people that witnessed or participated in my doctoral defense as examiners; two work in an Indigenous post-secondary institute, and eleven work in mainstream universities or colleges in British Columbia (BC). Following my defense I was actively recruited, along with others in an extensive national search, and accepted a tenure-track, faculty position in the same university in which I completed my doctoral program. The faculties are different; but they are literally located across the road from one another. The two-day interview process began in a welcome and prayer offered by an Elder from the local Musqueam nation, upon whose unceded territory this academic institution is located. It included a teaching demonstration, a formal panel interview, informal interviews by two faculty members, and an informal panel interview over dinner. Elders, community-based social work professionals, social work academics and students evaluated my work, and me, and made a recommendation to hire. Before, during and after the negotiations, I visited with Elders, family members, and academic colleagues to ask for guidance. Privately, I smudged, prayed and asked the Creator for guidance to know if accepting the position was the right choice. Eventually, the answer came and I accepted the academic position. In hindsight, having the courage to ask critical questions of senior colleagues and the Faculty Association



about the negotiation process may have proved beneficial. However, at that time, I did not know all the questions to ask, or the concessions that could be granted by the institution. That is an important lesson for others contemplating employment offers.

People repeatedly asked “How did that happen? I heard that universities never hire their own grads. We can never expect that to happen.” Apparently, that narrative is not always true; and the reality “depends” on many issues. This is good news for people who want to remain close to family, friends and community. Perhaps part of the reason stems from the dearth of Indigenous social work academics in North America, and the fact that some 35 Schools of Social Work across Canada are competing for a scarce resource. Perhaps it is bound up in the economic barriers created by the high cost of city living, or maybe it is the anticipated sense of isolation and racism that is experienced and communicated to others by some Indigenous academics in institutions where they are one of very few Indigenous peoples on campus.

Primarily racialized women academics provide guidance and preparation for new Indigenous academics in a newly released 30 chapter edited book, *Presumed Incompetent: The Intersections of Race and Class for Women in Academia* (2012). Four of the voices are highlighted here, common themes are identified, and a reflective connection to my own experience is offered. Michelle Jacob, a self-identified native academic, analyzed data from qualitative interviews with five Native women academics in Canada and the United States. Based on her findings, Jacob concludes that “native peoples face ongoing hostilities within academia, and (1) an extreme sense of isolation, (2) tokenism, and (3) tremendous service burdens, as well as competing and conflicting expectations from students, administrators, coworkers, family and community” (2012, p. 242). She identifies a number of strategies to deal with these challenges, including “building collectives, being transparent about challenges, valuing collectivism above individualism, advocating for community needs, focusing on current struggles as necessary for the benefit of future generations, and raising issues in official capacities” (p. 249). Yolanda Flores Niemann, a Chicana academic, echoes Jacob’s findings and writes about the consequences of racialized academics “putting themselves in a situation where they become vulnerable to the effects of tokenism, racism, stigmatization, and stereotype threat” (Niemann, 2012, p. 351). She recommends that racialized faculty do not accept positions in a department where we are the only minority members and the only ones teaching or conducting research on ethnic or racial issues. Further she argues that racialized faculty must be aware of “signs of overt, covert, and unconscious racism among potential colleagues; because racists cannot evaluate ethnic or racial minorities fairly” (Niemann, 2012, p. 351).

Every single one of the issues and strategic guidance initiatives identified by Jacob (2012) and Neiman (2012) resonate with my own academic experience. A few important strategic supports help mitigate my experiences and include: 1) the establishment of a formal academic mentor; 2) regular meetings with my Director; 3) a clear orientation to the various offices for research, equity and on-campus Indigenous supports such as an Indigenous academic caucus, library and elders; and, 4) an open-door policy and regular contact with Indigenous students.

Law professor, Adrien Katherine Wing identifies the multiplicative, not additive, holistic discrimination she feels as a black female in academia (2012, p. 357). Wing offers seven lessons for racialized women academics: (1) do more than the minimum expected for tenure; (2) understand that tenure is only the end of the beginning; (3) keep teaching the teacher and teach on a grand scale (innovate teaching techniques); (4) remember that service is the rent we pay for living on the planet, so extend your service obligation; (5)

be involved in *othermothering* (also known as mentoring); (6) take care of yourself; and, (7) give credit where credit is due (2012, pp. 362 – 371). Delia Douglas (2012), a Black independent scholar in Vancouver, BC also argues that racialized women experience multiple threats from students, faculty, administrators and community. She identifies that students struggle “with course materials because they had no background in the intersections of gender and race or critical race scholarship...which creates a growing tension and hostility among students frustrated and angry about their low grades” (p. 56). She states that Canadian universities remain “key sites of enculturation for whites since they are the places where the values and norms of the dominant culture are taught, affirmed and taken for granted” (Douglas, 2012, p. 64).

Wing’s (2012) advice to racialized women academics to do more than the minimum expected for tenure encourages me to consider if this could reinforce tokenism, and the need to prove oneself as worthy of a position of authority in the academy. It also encourages me to wonder what diverse personal, familial or community support issues might underpin a new academic’s decision work to the minimum expectation level. Perhaps those questions, decisions and answers are best left to individual academics; both Indigenous and otherwise. Wing’s recommendation to “keep teaching the teacher” offers one place to integrate Indigenous pedagogy into the classroom, through Indigenous understandings that we are all teachers, we are all learners, and that learning is cyclical, comes in many forms, and is life-long. To address the concern expressed by Douglas (2012) regarding multiple threats from students, faculty, administration and the community, it may be helpful for new Indigenous academics to know they can request a peer teaching evaluation to counter or compliment student teaching evaluations. New faculty should also be aware that at the beginning of their employment, they can work to negotiate a course release to strengthen their teaching through professional development options, and to address the heavy service burden experience. At the very least, making these issues visible can help to open the door to communication with academic leadership about Indigenous realities in academia, retention, future recruitment and success.

Learning from the experiences and advice of other racialized faculty working in diverse communities, institutions and faculties provides some important guidance. However, Indigenous academics also experience the disrespect of racism in our own ceded and unceded lands, a shared intersectional history of colonialism, exploitation and enforced relocation that is unique to us and our nations. We live with constant reminders that education was used as a weapon by Canada’s residential school project and our role to address the residential school legacy and mistrust of colonial educational institutions at the post-secondary level. It is a battle that continues in many ways and many sites. In October 2013, at the conclusion of his visit to Canada, the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, professor James Anaya stated in his preliminary report that Canada faces an ongoing crisis. He acknowledged hearing:

... remarkably consistent and profound distrust toward the First Nations Education Act being developed by the federal government, and in particular deep concerns that the process for developing the Act has not appropriately included nor responded to aboriginal views. In light of this, I urge the Government not to rush forward with this legislation, but to re-initiate discussions with aboriginal leaders to develop a process, and ultimately a bill, that addresses aboriginal concerns and incorporates aboriginal viewpoints on this fundamental issue. An equally important measure for improving educational outcomes, and one that could be

implemented relatively quickly, is to ensure that funding delivered to aboriginal authorities for education per student is at least equivalent to that available in the provincial educational systems (Anaya, 2013, retrieved <http://unsr.jamesanaya.org/statements/statement-upon-conclusion-of-the-visit-to-canada>).

Clearly, there is much work to do. Within our historical and contemporary context, it is important that Indigenous academics acknowledge our valued role in Western and Indigenous institutions, to bear witness, consider, and write about our educational realities in Canada. The promise of academic freedom and autonomy must also extend to our work to uncover and challenge exactly who, or what it is, that we are not free to critique; including the work of colonial governments and other Indigenous academics. It is naïve to suggest all Indigenous academics working in educational institutions will always agree on approaches to all issues, get along, be professional in all contacts, or even like one another. Some will choose a very solitary academic path, while others will seek to form alliances and supportive research, scholarly, activist or service relationships. The reality of micro-aggressions, implied threats of violence, harassment, racism, tribal struggles, pettiness, and professional jealousy exist in the academy; as they do in other work sites. For Indigenous academics, all of these experiences are inter-connected socially, economically, politically and historically. Daily work is needed to understand these realities, the structures and processes in place to address the issues from an employment perspective, find spaces for spiritual and emotional renewal, and integrate these teachings into academic life.

If academic work cannot be reconciled with our own Indigenous selves, we can always leave it. Through our relationships, knowledge, skills and experiences, we know we can always secure employment positions in another agency, organization or institution. What we cannot do, is “get” a new Indigenous community or relationships if we leave our own behind. For me, this is not a choice and there is no way to reconcile the differences. Relationships with Indigenous and family/friend/colleagues sustain and support me to fulfill this academic role. My cultural values, beliefs, ceremonies, education and relationships prepared me for it, allow me to participate in it, and will sustain me after the academic role ends. Other Indigenous academics might ask themselves whether this is yet another either/or watershed moment, and if there is a way to complement these two experiences rather than view them as competing interests. Perhaps it does not need to be competing, and each Indigenous academic must answer that question in relation to their own experience.

## Spiritual and Cultural Health in Research Grant Applications, Teaching, Scholarly and Service Activities

My experiences as a new faculty member in a corporate university began with a meeting with an Indigenous Elder and Indigenous mentors in the Education faculty and Social Work department. It also includes being repeatedly welcomed and assisted to learn about university structures designed to support my research, teaching, scholarly and service activities. Very early in my appointment, the *Office of Research Services* and the *Vice-President Research International Offices* each provided introductory sessions. These opportunities are designed to assist new faculty to navigate research application processes and manage research projects. The Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology identified workshops to enhance our teachings and writing skills. These were needed to complement the work of Indigenous and racialized people in the academy, and those in community that mentored me in the early days, and continue to do so today. These relationships balance the non-Indigenous second year faculty recounting



their grant-seeking experiences (ranging from poor to excellent), and the non-Indigenous research support staff orientation.

When people that have a vested interest in my (or your) success, offer to help, I take most at their word, and encourage others to do the same. For this reason, I offer a teaching story to make visible what is possible when we take people at their word, and step forward. I also offer this story with a couple of provisos. First, that I recognize that there is a fine line between writing “You can do it, just look at me!” and “If I could do it, there is no reason you should not be able to.” If that is what is taken from the teaching story, it will be counter to my respectful goal to encourage new Indigenous academics; rather it could instill feelings of being “lesser than” which is not, and will never, be my goal. Second, I acknowledge that the Indigenous teaching of humility sometimes means that stating publicly or writing “This is what I’ve done” could be construed as boastful and disrespectful of the efforts of others; again it is not my intention to make others feel “lesser than.” Third, I acknowledge that not everything (or anything) goes smoothly in academia, and that every so often a success occurs that might inspire others to try a novel approach or method. An often repeated teaching is that people don’t watch so much how you fall down, but they do watch how you pick yourself up. There are many failed initiatives, plans and projects in my life and they have all taught important lessons. My hope is that there is something in this successful teaching story that can also teach an important lesson.

This story begins after I attended the research orientation presentations. I followed up on their support offer and contacted the research office to ask if we could meet to discuss their services to new academics. The meeting was extremely productive, and I learned of a seed grant available to help support an eventual Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC) partnership development grant. The office asked for a short research outline, suggested some activities that could be supported and offered to preview it. I returned to Indigenous community members, told them about the opportunity and asked for ideas about what the funds could support. Then I waited and prayed for a useful result. When the response came, we developed a research outline, submitted it at 9:30 AM, and by 2:30 PM on the same day, learned we had a \$10,000 seed grant. We organized meetings, hired an undergraduate research assistant, talked and planned a research project with Indigenous Elders, judges, crown counsels, lawyers, court workers, academics, students, educators, health care professionals and others. Our focus is on the development of First Nations Courts in Canada; a new form of Indigenous therapeutic jurisprudence. All our preliminary work was developed on the basis of existing Indigenous relationships and guided by the prayers of Elders. Together we crafted a 62-page SSHRC grant and submitted it in November 2012. We collectively included what is important from our Indigenous perspectives, and were transparent in our intentions and rationale. In May 2013, we learned the \$200,000 grant was approved. More grant applications and articles developed using the same process, and are guided by what is important in community. Most are successful and build on existing Indigenous spirituality, knowledge, skills, abilities, culture, and traditions; all the things that are not instantly evident in a CV.

My own seven teachings for new Indigenous academics include: (1) Privilege Indigenous voices, cultural traditions, ways of knowing and being in everything academic including your education, job seeking, academic research, writing, teaching and service expectations; (2) acknowledge the dichotomy between academia and community, and work to connect community and academia in respectful, inclusive and rights-based ways that matter to Indigenous communities, and are guided by political struggles for a

better future; (3) ask questions and follow up with those that have a vested interest in your success; (4) acknowledge that racism exists, deal with it in strategic, policy-supported and transparent ways; (5) view your service expectations to others as a key role in life; (6) do not allow the fear, derision, discouragement, pettiness or racism of others to prevent you from taking risks to learn and grow; and, (7) remember that Creator puts you in Western and Indigenous educational institutions and academic roles for a purpose. Trust in that.

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