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Widening the Angle: Film as Alternative Pedagogy For Wellness In Indigenous Youth

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Abstract

Indigenous youth face numerous challenges in terms of their well-being. Colonization enforced land and cultural loss, fractured relationships, and restricted the use of the imagination and agentic capacity (Colonial policies, structures, and approaches in education have been detrimental to Indigenous youth (Nardozi, 2013). Many First Nations leaders, community members, and youth have expressed a need for a wider range of activities that move beyond Western models of knowledge and learning (Goulet & Goulet, 2015). School curricula in Indigenous communities are incorporating alternative pedagogical tools, such as the arts, that not only allow youth to explore and express their realities and interests but that also offer them holistic ways of learning and knowing (Yuen et al., 2013). This article describes a participatory arts research project which featured film production and was delivered in the context of a grade 10 Communications Media course. The research took place at a First Nations high school in a Neehithuw (Woodland Cree) community in northern Saskatchewan. This article highlights the content of the films produced, the benefits of the filmmaking experience, and the challenges faced by the teacher and students during the process.

Introduction

In Canada, health services and research, along with mainstream conceptions of health and wellness have been dominated by the biomedical, or disease, model that focuses on physical pathology while largely excluding the emotional, social, and spiritual components of wellness. This model has marginalized Indigenous people whose traditional concepts of health and wellness are holistic and focus on attaining harmony between the mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional aspects of life health (Lavallée, 2007; Lukasewich, 2015; Waldram, 2004). Currently however, concepts of health and the manner in which researchers engage in health research are undergoing transformation as fields other than the medical explore the social, political and ecological approaches to health and wellness (Greenwood, de Leeuw, Lindsay, & Reading, 2015). New perspectives, practices, and programming are underway. These seek to incorporate holistic approaches that include a sociocultural view of health as wellness or wellbeing, a perspective often referred to as ‘living in a good way’ in Indigenous contexts (Goulet & Goulet, 2015). Many of these new approaches have involved Indigenous youth, who represent one of the fastest growing demographics in Canada and whose health challenges are diverse and multi-faceted (Lukasewich, 2015).

New research approaches are often carried out in school environments and can represent alternative pedagogies that are more culturally appropriate for Indigenous youth (Stewart, Riecken, Scott, Tanaka, & Riecken, 2008) than those that rely on “cognitive imperialism”

(Riecken et al., 2006, p. 282). Cognitive imperialism is a term coined by Battiste (2000) to capture the oppression of Indigenous thought and ways of coming to know that undergird Canadian schooling, where rationalism is elevated above other ways of knowing (Graveline, 1998). Programs of learning are most often linear and sequentially based (Hesch, 1995), ignoring the possibility that there may be other ways of learning such as circular or holistic pedagogies (Graveline, 1998). Indeed, Indigenous leaders and community members, as well as the youth themselves, are expressing a need for a broader scope of educational opportunities and activities (Finlay & Akbar, 2016).

One of these alternative research approaches and pedagogical tools involves the use of the arts. Arts-based programming has been shown to be a significant means to connect with and engage Indigenous youth (i.e. Goulet, Linds, Episkenew, & Schmidt, 2011; Yuen et al., 2013). Across Canada, Indigenous youth are participating in a wide variety of arts-based programming and projects that take place in school and in other settings and use mediums such as writing, visual arts, poetry, dance, and music (Finlay & Akbar, 2016). These activities provide youth with an opportunity to express their interests and concerns and to think about their experiences and circumstances. At the same time, participating in the arts can be a transformative experience for Indigenous youth which strengthens perseverance through difficulties, teamwork, and facilitates holistic wellness (Victor et al., 2016).

This article describes the process and outcomes of a project that taught film and film production in a First Nations high school located in a predominantly Neehithuw¹ (Woodland Cree) community in northern Saskatchewan. Within the context of a holistic view of health and wellness among Indigenous youth, the article highlights the content of the films, the rewards of the filmmaking experience, the challenges faced by the students during the process, and the teacher's reflections on the process.

Barriers to Health and Education

The Canadian Indigenous population is relatively young and growing. A 2012 census revealed that 46% of Indigenous people were under 25 years of age, as compared to 30% for non-Indigenous populations (Statistics Canada, 2015). By 2016, the average age for Indigenous people was 32.1, where non-Indigenous ages averaged to 40.9 (Statistics Canada, 2017). Indigenous youth face many health difficulties caused by social inequalities such as racism,

¹ In this article, the concepts of the Cree language are used since it is the language of the community in which the research took place. There are different dialects and spellings of Cree terms that are used in the writing of this paper since different sources of Cree language come from different dialect communities, for example the Neehithuw community where the research took place (TH dialect) and the Nehinuw community of Cumberland House (N dialect).

poor educational outcomes, low-employment and poverty, including addiction, depression, and high rates of suicide (Bertrand, 2013a, 2013b). Ning and Wilson (2012) conducted a comparative review of health literature from 2000 to 2010 on Indigenous youth and their non-Indigenous counterparts in Canada. They noted that, compared to their counterparts, Indigenous youth are disproportionately burdened by health disparities, resulting in more suicides, addictions, diabetes and sexually transmitted diseases. For Indigenous youth, high school graduation is important. It enhances their ability to find employment which helps alleviate the poverty facing Indigenous peoples (FSIN, 2002). This, in turn has a positive impact on lifelong health (Howe, 2011). Additionally, Indigenous youth in Canada have a suicide rate five to seven times higher than their non-Indigenous counterparts. The health challenges of Indigenous youth and the disparity that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous health in Canada have largely been viewed through a lens of pathology as if individual deficiencies among First Nations people were the cause of these problems (Czyzewski, 2011). Using traditional Indigenous holistic notions of health (Finlay & Akbar, 2016), as well as a trauma-informed decolonizing framework (Linklater, 2014) which looks at the devastating effects of colonization on First Nations' health, it becomes clear that perspectives that emphasize individual pathology or that isolate mental health from social factors are inappropriate and damaging to Indigenous people (Lukasewich, 2015). Rather, looking at the oppressive nature of colonization and its structures, including those that affect Indigenous education, is a more suitable framework to employ when considering Indigenous youth and wellness (Battiste, 2013; Czyzewski, 2011).

Health and Colonization

The health issues affecting Indigenous individuals and communities must be viewed holistically within the context of colonization. Health and wellness disparities among Indigenous youth are the result of oppression and racism, both historical and current (Allan & Smylie, 2015; Waldram, Herring, & Young, 2006). Historically, colonialism has subjugated and dismantled First Nation's traditional economic and social systems through many means such as war, legislation, government policies, theoretical constructs, education, and the media (cf Cronlund Anderson, & Robertson, 2011; Daschuk, 2013; Episkenew 2009; Paul, 1993; Waldram, 2004) , to name a few, The trauma caused by colonization as well as ongoing racism and micro-aggressions continue to affect the health of Indigenous peoples (Allan & Smylie, 2015; Chae & Walters, 2009; Currie, Wild, Schopflocher, & Laing, 2015). The inter-generational trauma caused by the residential school experience is one example of how the experience of colonization continues to affect the health of Indigenous communities (Riecken, Scott & Tanaka, 2006). Cree educator Kirkness (1992) stated that the legacy of the residential schools was one of cultural conflict, alienation, poor self- concept, and a lack of preparedness for independence, for jobs, and for life in general. In describing the intergenerational effects, Smith, Varcoe, and Edwards (2005) asserted that the enforced separation of families, land,

language and community along with the shaming and belittling of Indigenous peoples perpetrated in residential schools caused the disruption of cultural teachings, parenting skills, and community identities over multiple generations. For the Canadian government, these coercive strategies achieved their objective of the re-socialization and assimilation of Indigenous children through the suppression of Indigenous identities including their imaginations.

According to Graveline (1998), historical and ongoing colonization produce a “cage of oppression” (p. 92) where individual and community agency is restricted as decisions for action are limited by others such as government agencies. It is testament to the strength and resilience of Indigenous peoples that they were able and continue to resist and survive the colonial onslaught. Language and culture provide protective buffers in their resistance to ongoing racism and colonialism (Chandler & Lalonde, 2009; Ulturgasheva, Rasmus, Wexler, Nystad, & Kral, 2014). Cultural values have persisted over time, as is evident in Indigenous languages and practices, which when used in health programming, have the potential to build upon individual and cultural strengths, thus reinforcing positive cultural identities including strengthening students’ connections to each other, to the land, and to their community. The reinforcement of strong individual and cultural identities along with the decolonization of institutions, social structures, and mentalities are thus central to addressing health issues in Indigenous communities (Czyzewski, 2011; Kirmayer, Tait, & Simpson, 2009).

Colonization of the imagination

Agency, the ability to act, is dependent on having a well-developed imagination (Hughes & Wilson, 2004). Before taking action, one must first imagine what change might look like, second imagine the steps required to achieve that change, and then third, have the volition and agency to enact the imagined changes (Chirkov, 2014). But at residential schools, Indigenous children’s imaginations and actions were suppressed as a component of assimilation (Driskill, 2008; Graveline, 1998) and resocialization. The colonization of the imagination is another legacy of residential schools that has received little critical attention.

Historically, residential schools were highly structured institutions and the students were expected to simply conform to the relentless and rigid schedule. In addition, life in Indigenous communities was dictated by the Indian agent and other government officials who had control over their affairs (Goulet & Goulet, 2015). Even in the current school environment, many Indigenous youth feel that they must just be quiet, listen, and do their work (Goulet et al., 2011). In residential schools, there was no space for creative self-expression or imaginative pursuits and the legacy of restricting imaginations continues today in more subtle ways (Riecken, et al., 2006; Yuen et al., 2013). Therefore, providing activities that encourage the imaginative work that was denied to First Nations youth has the potential to “expand(s) their

expressive and perceptive possibilities” (Boal, 2006, p. 18) and enhance their agentic capacity to make decisions pertaining to their own health and well-being.

First Nations Education

Historical and ongoing colonial policies, structures, and approaches have affected First Nations education. In addition to systemic discrimination of underfunding First Nations schools (Taylor & Steinhauer, 2010) and inadequate infrastructure, Indigenous communities and youth in Canada encounter a wide range of problems when it comes to education. Since the education system was designed to meet the needs of settler society, it continues to impose a largely “cultural imperialistic curriculum” (Reichen et al, 2006, p. 198). This colonial imperialism “denies [Indigenous] people their...cultural integrity by maintaining the legitimacy of only one language, one culture and one frame of reference” (Battiste, 2000, p. 198).

Even art has been used for assimilative purposes. Lentis (2017) argued that the arts were used in American Indian schools initially for “training students' minds and hands in the values and customs of American society” (p. xxi). Lentis borrowed the concept of “colonization of consciousness” (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1992, p. 236) to analyze how education reshaped the culture of Indigenous Americans. This concept was developed by anthropologists who explored the colonization of the Tswana people in South Africa by Protestant missionaries. Art in these schools was used to assimilate students in “a particular way of seeing and being, to colonize their consciousness with the signs and practices, the axioms and aesthetics, of an alien culture” (Lentis, 2017, p. 267). Further, the “assimilation of the Indigenous population through education, however, was not an isolated case, but was rather part of broader policy that aimed to destroy all those local cultures that did not contribute to the country's economic interests or threatened the country's notion of itself as a unified or homogenous place of opportunity” (Lentis, 2017, p. 310).

Though Lentis' work focused more on drawing and handicrafts in these boarding schools, we can see how important intention and implementation is in the use of the arts in education: the arts can be a tool of colonization or decolonization, depending on who controls the content of the art produced and the judgement of what will be valued in the students' creations.

To ensure that research using the arts is decolonizing, Tuck (2009) calls on researchers to stop thinking of Indigenous communities and people as ‘broken’ and depleted where the research focus is “damage centered” (p. 412). She asks for research that captures “desire instead of damage” (p. 416), in order to complicate our understanding of people's lives. This ‘complex personhood’ reflects Indigenous understandings of the individual embedded within

interaction with the collective, rather than the sole focus on the individual, but, at the same time, understanding the contradictions in peoples' actions.

Gerald Vizenor's (1994) idea of *survivance* (1994) also points out that while Indigenous youth are products of the history of colonization, they are simultaneously "moving beyond our ...basic survival in the face of overwhelming cultural genocide to create spaces of synthesis and renewal" (p. 53). He further writes that survivance is not just survival but also resistance, not heroic or tragic, but the tease of tradition" (1998, p. 93). Likewise, the present research is part of an exploration of how the arts can provide a tool for renewal and synthesis by creating spaces for student creativity and self-expression.

Art and Film in the Health and Well-being of Indigenous Youth

According to Archibald and Dewar (2010), art is a traditional form of expression for First Nations peoples which enables confidence-building while also bringing individual and cultural identities together with well-being. In addition to transmitting traditional Indigenous knowledge, arts-based activities can stimulate embodied healing by enabling participants to become absorbed in physical tasks and by participating in group activities that strengthen social bonds (Lincoln, 2010). Involvement in arts-based activities or workshops not only gives Indigenous youth the opportunity to develop technical and artistic skills, but allows them to transfer these skills and develop competency that can be used in other life situations, including situations that call for planning, organizing, story sharing, and working with others. Through participation in arts-based activities and workshops, youth can also learn about perseverance, and adopt attitudes of respect and appreciation (Victor et al., 2016).

Across Canada, a myriad of arts-based projects involving Indigenous youth use mediums such as writing, the visual arts, poetry, dance, and music to allow youth, both individually and collectively, to express and reflect on their own experiences and circumstances (i.e. Archibald, Dewar, Reid, & Stevens, 2012; Finlay & Akbar, 2016; Flicker et al., 2014). In a research report done for the Aboriginal Healing Foundation on the use of the creative arts in healing programs across Canada, Archibald et al. (2012) indicated that people who participated in Indigenous healing programs involving visual art, music, dance, and storytelling felt that these activities helped establish spaces of emotional and cultural safety. The researchers reported that these positive effects were the result of the participants being both physically active and dynamically creative, which allowed the connection between mind, body, and spirit to be reinforced. For example, in their project using the arts-based method of photovoice, Castledon, Garvin and Huu-ay-aht First Nation (2008) found that the project's success came from "balancing power, creating a sense of ownership in the research, fostering trust, building capacity, and implementing a culturally appropriate research project" (p. 1398).

The use of film or video has also been employed to improve the health and wellness of Indigenous youth in Canada. For example, the Wapikoni Mobile film project in Quebec began in 2005 to help alleviate isolation and the high rates of suicide of Indigenous youth in that province (Bertrand, 2013b). Learning and producing film was designed to help youth develop better self-esteem, resilience, and technical and social skills (see <http://www.wapikoni.ca/about/who-are-we>). Similarly, Indigenous youth in a British Columbian research project made digital videos about health issues as a means of developing culturally grounded concepts of health and wellness (Riecken, Scott & Tanaka, 2006). Another film project involving Indigenous youth occurred in Saskatchewan where a multi-year urban film program supported film and film production skills with urban Indigenous youth with the goal of seeking healing and well-being (Robbins, Linds, Ironstand, & Goodpipe, 2017).

Studying and using film and video for health and wellness among Indigenous youth has specific advantages. According to Riecken et al. (2006), video and filmmaking correspond with the inclinations and interests of youth today because most young people, including Indigenous youth, have been raised in a world of digital media such as television, movies, social media, and the internet. This familiarity with digital media can help youth employ critical thinking about how media is employed to propagate mainstream or dominant ideas (Selber, 2004) and can encourage them to shift from being consumers to producers of media (Riecken et al., 2006) when they are the creators of the media itself. In doing so, technical and cultural knowledge is acquired through hands-on experiences that directly involve the youth (Reicken et al., 2006). Becoming familiar with the process of video or film production also promotes these mediums as an alternative means of literacy to move beyond the cognitive imperialism or “colonial style(s)” (Riecken et al., 2006, p. 269) of learning. Additionally, film and film production can strengthen student agency due to the level of creativity and decision making that producing a film entails: “Writing a script, choosing a camera angle, making an edit decision, directing talent and getting the final product to market, all require a degree of creativity” (York, 2000, n.p.).

Bertrand (2013a) considers modern media like film as a way for Indigenous people, including youth, to have a voice, to reinforce community ties, and to re-appropriate Indigenous culture. She refers to film as a “technologically updated and mechanized form of orality” (p. 67). As such, using film as pedagogy among First Nations youth is a culturally appropriate tool (Stewart et al., 2008). For those First Nations youth making films that entail aspects of traditional culture and content, the filmmaking process and production can enact a form of resistance to assimilation into Western culture (Giard, 2006). Indeed, Bertrand (2013a) refers to films produced by projects like the Wapikoni Mobile as the new talking stick or drum.

The Project: Filmmaking as an Alternative Pedagogical Tool

This research is part of *Acting Out! But in a Good Way*, a multiyear research project developed by a group of researchers affiliated with Indigenous Peoples' Health Research Centre (IPHRC). This project investigated the impact of arts-based programming on the health and wellness of First Nations youth. Over several years, we have offered workshops, after-school programs, and supported high school credit courses that use arts-based practices in collaboration with First Nations youth in both southern and northern communities in Saskatchewan.² The project has utilized several artistic modalities as both participatory visual methodologies and health intervention programming including visual arts, theatre games, image theatre, and play writing. Participatory visual methodologies represent a way to engage people in the co-production of knowledge that reflects their lived experiences while giving them shared control over the research process (Enright & O'Sullivan, 2012; Fraser & al Sayah, 2011).

Through participation in these various arts and group building activities the youth, and researchers, learn about the decision-making processes that lead to both unhealthy behaviours as well as those that lead to health and well-being. The activities are structured to enable youth to assume and share leadership roles. This approach to shared and youth leadership in the creation of artistic expression enables the youths' perspectives and challenges they face on health and wellness to emerge.

Consequently, the films produced in this project are considered "a kind of creative cultural text" of Indigenous youth "reflecting [their] interests and concerns" (Stewart et al., 2008, p. 183). Supporting youth in developing their own agency and creative expression encourages a holistic approach to wellness and well-being. In other words, health and well-being were not to be the content or focus of the films, but, rather the use of the arts was intended to enable youth to develop confidence in their decision making and creative abilities, thus enhancing their agency.

Data Generation

The film project undertaken as part of the present study took place within a six-week grade 10 Communications Media course³ at a First Nations high school in a Neehithuw (Woodland Cree) community in northern Saskatchewan. The course included a Photovoice project and a

² Archived at <https://web.archive.org/web/20170928062943/http://actingout.iphrc.ca:80/>

³ The school had adopted a "block system" where courses were delivered intensively over a six-week period. Students would only be registered in one course per block and attended that class for the entire school day. The block-system of intensive learning has been used in other Aboriginal communities (see Nardozi, 2013) and is seen to be more adaptive to the needs of certain communities.

film production that were preceded by modules on communication theory, media literacy, image analysis, and copyright. Classes ran daily from 9:00 to 2:30 pm. The course was co-taught by Lacey Eninew, a Neehithuw teacher (who is from the community), Janice Victor a Settler researcher, and Marcel, a Métis filmmaker, actor, and photographer. Janice and Lacey had worked together as a researcher-educator team in the school the previous year. Marcel is an artist and filmmaker who had previously worked with First Nations youth on multiple arts and filmmaking projects so he was brought in for the last two weeks of the course to teach the filmmaking component.

Students were informed at the beginning of the course that if they gave consent, their course projects would be included as part of a research project investigating the impact of the arts on wellness. Examples of a research article (Yuen et al., 2013) and a Photovoice project (Henry, 2013) were given to students to illustrate how they could share their knowledge with a broader audience. Nine students between the ages of 14 to 20 participated in the film projects but only eight provided informed consent for their work to be used as research. The researchers had signed a research agreement with the First Nation and ethical approval was obtained through the Universities of Regina and Lethbridge, at which the researchers worked.

Students received instruction on photographic and film techniques before they started producing their films. Marcel indicated in an interview that the classes sometimes consisted of “the boring stuff about film” like the history of film and how it evolved. Students were shown equipment and watched a variety of movies, including classics such as Fritz Lang’s (1927) *Metropolis* and Charlie Chaplin’s (1925) *The Gold Rush*. Standard practices about acting, writing, and how to make a storyboard were also part of the curriculum. Once the filming started, however, Marcel encouraged students to “break all the rules” in order to foster creativity.

The students paired up to produce four films that represented different genres: a horror film, a dramatization of a traditional Cree legend, a crime thriller, and a documentary about their own filmmaking process. Students played central and supporting roles, or helped with the soundtrack and technical details. Authorship of each film varied. The horror film was written by that group. The Cree legend was adapted from a book of the First Nations’ legends in the school’s library, the crime thriller was a remake of a scene from Quentin Tarantino’s (1992) *Reservoir Dogs*, and the documentary was based on interviews conducted by the students with their classmates. In the interviews, students were asked for their biographical information, why they made the film, what they learned about filmmaking, and how they felt about the experience. There were several challenges to completing the project. There were two weeks to teach basic film technique, and enable students to write, record, and edit their films. Student absenteeism, school-wide activities, and rainy weather on scheduled film days delayed film production. It became necessary for Marcel to help the students with editing and fine tuning.

His involvement at this stage meant that care had to be taken so that each film remained the students “without making it Marcel’s”.

At the end of the course, students were asked to complete a questionnaire about what they liked best and least in the course, and the ways they may think differently about media, their community, or themselves as a result of the various activities. To rate and showcase students’ achievements, Lacey organized a film festival at the end of the course for invited parents, the school and broader community. The students’ films and Photovoice projects were shown and there was then a panel discussion with the student “directors.”

Data Analysis

Sandy, the second author, carried out the majority of the data analysis, which was influenced by other studies that used video/film produced by Indigenous youth. (i.e. Eglinton, Gubrium, & Wexler, 2017). The data were examined as both product and process; that is, the content of the films and filmmaking process of producing them. This approach offered greater insight into the lives and concerns of Indigenous youth. Consequently, the three fictional films were analyzed as cultural productions while the documentary was analyzed for what it said about the process of filmmaking for the youth.

The first step in the analysis began with multiple reviews of the three fictional films combined with copious note-taking. Special attention was paid to content (Lukasewich, 2015) and narrative (Kovach, 2009). Particular focus was paid to the storyline and aesthetics (Christian, 2010), which looked at items such as sound, scenery, and even the demeanor and affect of the actors. These elements are congruent with Indigenous methodologies (Kovach, 2009). The three factors of aesthetics, narrative, and content provided the basis for looking at the themes in the films. To achieve congruency between the framework of decolonization and methodology, we chose to highlight three themes related to Indigenous culture and health: *Relationship with the Land and Environment; Passing Down Knowledge; Fun and Playfulness; and Violence.*

The second step in data analysis examined the process of making the films using primarily the documentary and the answers to the questionnaire. The documentary was transcribed and responses were reviewed, arranged into themes, and assigned a descriptive name. The four coded descriptions were: *Being Heard through Film; Learnings on: Film, Self and Others; Community and Environment; and Inspired for the Future.* Information from newspaper articles about the project and course and conversations with the film instructor were reviewed to confirm that these themes were echoed in these other sources. In many instances, this was the case. This information was added to the analysis. Personal e-mail communication with Marcel occurred on March 7, 2017 where questions were asked of him regarding the themes

found in the documentary and questionnaire. His answers were also incorporated into the analysis. Along the way, the teacher's reflections were incorporated as her views express the complexity of using the arts to decolonize the classroom.

Findings: Three Films as Cultural Text

As previously mentioned, the three films featured in this project included a traditional story, a thriller and a film inspired by the horror genre. The films represented an influx of traditional and contemporary pop culture as each, to one degree or another, incorporated Western and traditional Indigenous elements. The discussion of the films here will include a synopsis of each film and a brief explanation on how each film, in its own way, represents a blend of both Indigenous and Western cultural elements. Certain manifestations of Indigenous ways of being are especially evident: an emphasis on land and the relationships with the environment; the passing down of traditional knowledge; and a sense of humour, fun and playfulness.

Synopsis of the Films

Whitiko and the Wolf is a dramatization of a legend of the Whitiko⁴ who, in the tradition of many First Nations, is a greedy, self-centred, cannibalistic spirit with a heart of ice. Accompanied by flute music and hand drumming, the film traces the story of a family living on a trap line who have an encounter with a Whitiko. A young woman sees a Whitiko while out by herself and runs back to tell her family. The family seeks the help of a medicine man who then dreams about a wolf. Upon waking, he calls upon the wolf to help. The wolf protects the family by chasing off the Whitiko. The filming took place in the nearby forest and close to the lake shore. The character of the Whitiko, and a superimposed image of a wolf, appear at various junctures in the film. The film follows various characters as they make their way through the natural landscapes. It is important to note that the two students who decided to make this film, and one in particular, chose to reproduce a traditional story: a choice that suggests the value these stories hold as part of their culture.

The film *REZDOGS* is based on the 1992 American crime thriller *Reservoir Dogs* by director Quentin Tarantino. The student film closely follows the torture sequence of the original film where Mr. Blonde ties up, cuts off the ear of a police officer, pours gasoline on him, and taunts him with a lighter, all to the cheerful soundtrack of *Stuck in the Middle with You* by *Stealers Wheels*. The scenes of ear cutting (a prop carved from a potato) and the pouring of gasoline (water) take place on a small cliff overlooking the lake that is surrounded by boreal forest. The student who decided to do this remake had difficulty deciding on a project so Janice and Marcel provided different ideas and movie clips until the student made his choice.

⁴ This is the spelling and pronunciation used in the book on which the youth based the film. Other spellings and pronunciations include Weetigo and Wendigo.

This scene was highlighted to the student for its cinematic brilliance that overlays graphic violence with the irony of a catchy pop tune (Coulthard, 2009). The resulting film produced an odd contrast between the beauty of the filming location and the actual activities of the scene.



Film *One Night*: <http://www.ijea.org/v21n1/OneNight.mp4>

The film, *One Night*, follows four high school students who go walking through a school at night in search of a ghost. The film begins with three young women deciding to determine the truth of a haunting at the school. They return to the school later that night accompanied by a young man and are shown setting up cameras at various locations in the school. The figure of the ghost – a young girl – appears in a few different locations in the school. Three young women seen at the beginning of the film decide to hunt the ghost and come back to the school at night accompanied by a young man. Much of the film is accompanied by moaning and whispering sounds that represent the voice of the ghost. Eventually, the young man sets off by himself at his own peril and is eventually killed, presumably by the ghost. The others are seen walking down a hallway as the film nears its end. While spirits do play a role in Neehithuw culture, this film was mostly inspired by Western pop culture, in particular, the ghost hunter shows that are very popular in North America at this time (Montgomery & Montgomery, 2011). However, the students put their own mark on this film by playfully incorporating what might loosely be called “rez slang,” thereby showing the blending of cultural influences that is common in diverse contemporary society (Finlay & Akbar, 2016). This was the only film of

the three where the plot was written from students' imaginations, instead of being adapted from other sources.

Relationship to the Land and Environment

Two notable aspects in the films are the human relationship to the environment and its non-human elements and creatures, and the presence of natural landscapes. *Whitiko and the Wolf* is replete with scenes of people interacting with the environment: the lake, lakeshore, forest, and sandy grassy areas. The visual aspects of these elements are accompanied by the audio such as the sound of the waves on the shore. People are seen interacting with naturally found items like stones and walking sticks made from branches. Other beings, such as the wolf and the Whitiko, also have relationships with humans. This story represents the importance of respect for the spiritual realm and the dependence of humans on other animals and the land for survival. The film ultimately expressed the beauty of the location, the close relationship that people have with the land, and the valued role of traditional Indigenous knowledge. In *REZDOGS*, the choice of the cliff by the lake as a location was primarily carried out for practical considerations as it was a public space where no specific permission was needed to carry out filming. Still, the film's location mirrors other Indigenous films that "focus on a particular geographical space" (Raheja, 2007, p. 1167). Natural spaces like this are part of the sense of community and place that infiltrate youths' personhood (Corntassel, 2012).

Fun and Playfulness

Another notable feature in the films, primarily in *One Night* and *Whitiko and the Wolf*, is playfulness and fun. Comedy is inserted in *Whitiko and the Wolf* in a couple of instances. The first occurred when one of the characters "found" a much looked-for ax by tripping over it. A second instance of playfulness was shown in an "outtake" following the film credits where one of the student directors asks a toy stuffed wolf how its day was, to which she replied for it, "Ruffff!" For *One Night*, the intention of the filmmaking experience, according to one of the student actors, was to have fun. Throughout the film, the actors do seem to be having fun and display a casual and somewhat playful demeanor as they pursue the ghost. For example, when the three young women warn the young man that he might not be safe and that he should leave the premises, they say this in a tongue-in-cheek manner. Further, the use of "rez slang" in the film emerged as an extension of the joking we engaged in during class time.⁵ While playfulness and fun are often regarded as frivolous in Western society and as being in contrast to productivity, most Indigenous communities value laughter and humour (Goulet, Linds,

⁵ One group used the word "skoden" in their storyboarding exercise. Marcel asked what it meant, to which they responded, "let's go then." The term became a running joke in the class that the students incorporated into *One Night*.

Episkenew, & Schmidt, 2011). Moreover, it is a traditional way of being and interacting for Cree peoples (Goulet et al., 2011).

Violence

Violence, or the threat of, is present in all three films. *Whitiko and the Wolf Spirit* implies violence through the potential threat presented by the Whitiko. The Whitiko/Windigo legends tell that this spirit can possess people, eat away at their spirits, and transform them into insatiable cannibals (Smallman, 2014). The different Windigo stories may be seen as symbolic of a threat, such as starvation, to the family, a lesson against greed or excess, or simply a warning for children against wandering off (Smallman, 2014). The Whitiko film follows the typical folklore genre of describing the protagonist's journey of overcoming some external threat (Zipes, 1988). Unlike the Whitiko film, the violence of *REZDOGS* and *One Night* is explicit. In *One Night*, the male character who leaves the group ends up being hung by a chain around his neck, a scene that we interpret as the mimesis of the standard horror film trope. The decision to portray violence in the latter two films seems, more than anything else, to be a reflection of the proliferation of graphic violence in contemporary pop culture and its appeal to audiences.

Passing down Knowledge

Knowledge in two different forms is passed down in two of the films. In *Whitiko and the Wolf*, knowledge is seen as being passed down inter-generationally through the oral tradition. One of the lead characters in the film mentions that it was her grandfather who told her of the Whitiko. A medicine man in the film is also seen sharing his knowledge, some of which was gained from dreams, with the family. Given that this film was based on a traditional Neehithuw oral story that was published locally, it has the capacity to "provide a basis for continuity for future generations" (Kovach, 2009, p. 94). These legends and stories are a "means for passing knowledge within tribal traditions" that represent "ancestral ways of knowing" (p. 94). For many peoples, teachings from the physical world (including animals) and the spiritual realm are used for life guidance. In *One Night*, knowledge transmission takes on more contemporary influences but with the age-old theme of potentially dangerous spirits. The characters in it are shown discussing the urban legend of a girl who died at the school prior to their decision to go on their nighttime adventure. Although the setting is contemporary, the story represents the transmission of knowledge that warns against a particular threat.

Filmmaking: Rewards and Challenges for Indigenous Youth and their Teachers

Generally, the filmmaking experience for the students enrolled in the Communications Media 10 class was reported by both students and teachers to be an overwhelmingly rewarding experience for the youth. The students enjoyed making the films and used expressions like

“exciting,” “great,” “cool,” “awesome,” and “fun” to describe their experience. In addition to enjoyment and fun, the filmmaking experience provided the students with an opportunity to find and express their voices, gain knowledge, reflect on community and environment, and find inspiration for the future.

Subsequent to the analysis for this paper, Lacey had time to reflect on her own teaching practice and the use of the arts as a decolonizing pedagogical tool with Indigenous youth. Her comments are integrated in the following section in text boxes in order to clearly identify her voice as the teacher. Her comments demonstrate the challenges of using the arts with Indigenous youth who live in communities struggling with the effects of colonization and the subsequent social and health issues which the youth are experiencing in their lives.

Being Heard through Film

The filmmaking experience was meaningful for students as it provided them with the opportunity to express themselves in a manner that was more active than listening, reading and writing. It was a means of validating topics that they thought were important, thus developing their decision-making abilities and individual identities. . Marcel encouraged the students to experiment with the filmmaking rules they had learned in class and to make the work their own (Mikolayenko, 2016). This coming to voice, the validation of the students’ concerns and interests, and the emphasis on self-direction and creativity counter the school environments many Indigenous youth, both past and present, have found themselves in, where the expectation for student participation emphasizes passivity, silence, and obedience (Authors, 2011). Youth have an important voice that often is not heard as much as it should be. The filmmaking project provided a venue for them to practice using that voice. At the same time, The Teacher reminds us of the complexity, contradictions, and challenges of using the arts as a medium of expression and pedagogy with Indigenous youth.

Lacey’s Reflection

This was an extremely emotionally heavy undertaking and the next time I attempt to do a project like this, I will need to pray. During some of the drama exercises, I noticed the students’ obsession with the shadow part of life, darkness or death. When I gave them a task to create something from nothing, most often they would choose funerals.

My learning lesson is that, yes, I must give them the opportunity to express what they really want to say. But at the same time, I need to guide them to places of light, of healing, of hope, of wellness, of life. I need to lead them without compromising their authentic voice.

Environment and Community

Two of the three films, *REZDOGS* and *Whitiko and the Wolf* were filmed in the forest and near or overlooking the lake. Two of the student actors reported that thanks to the filming experience in these natural locations, they felt a greater appreciation and concern for the land and their local environment. One student noted that she was concerned about cleanliness and keeping the environment free from garbage. At the film festival, another student noted that she appreciated the community's support for the student films by showing up to the community screening. These are examples of decolonization of school practices where connections to the land and the community are strengthened.

At the same time, the challenging legacy of colonization in the community context was evident in the topics that the students chose for their films. As the Teacher reflects below, the imagery they used at times mirrored reality a little too closely.

Lacey's Reflection

I wonder if, as the teacher, because I didn't give them enough opportunity to imagine a "better future," they instead chose the "dominant story" to recreate in their films? The stories being that of suicide and violence. Less than a year after the completion of the project, six young girls in other nearby First Nation communities committed suicide by hanging. It was a chilling reminder of what the students in this particular group chose to re-create in their films.

Unfortunately, one student from this film group experienced a difficult transition and attempted suicide the following year. She was admitted to the hospital after taking pills. She is, as far as I know, taking counselling and was thankfully unsuccessful in her attempt.

I felt that I failed as a facilitator to guide them to places of hope and resilience. I instead gave them full reign to create whatever they wanted, and unfortunately the places they went were perhaps places they were most familiar.

Inspired for the Future

Some of the students reported that they initially got involved in the film project because it was a class assignment or because they thought it would be "cool" to re-enact a traditional Cree story. Regardless of what their initial motivation may have been for getting involved, the experience of filmmaking left at least some of the students wanting more. They reported wanting to learn more about filmmaking and wanting to make more films. They expressed a number of ideas for future learning including: wanting to learn more about acting, acquiring technical skills such as using a crane and other video equipment, re-making a music video, and "mak[ing] a longer movie with the whole class." Most of the students said they would take the class again if it was offered.

Learnings: About Film, Self, and Others

The filmmaking experience allowed the students to gain knowledge through experiential, hands-on learning (Authors, 2014). Acquiring knowledge in this instance concerned both the technical skills involved in filmmaking and important learnings about oneself and about one's relationships with others. All the students reported having gained knowledge and insight as to what goes into filmmaking, and why things are done in a certain way. One student stated that she had always considered filmmaking as boring until she took the class. Another said that he was surprised that so much could be done with so little (i.e. equipment). The students reported learning many technical skills about filmmaking: how to create storyboards, how to work with angles, shadows, lighting, how to use and make props, and how to act. Marcel indicated that the filmmaking process gave the students "a new way to think, to let them know it's all right to be artsy or an artist. It wakes up that side of the brain that sometimes never gets a chance" (personal communication, March 7, 2017). Indeed, this type of learning is self-validating and can be considered a means of resisting the "cognitive imperialism" (Riecken et al., 2006, p. 282) that is often part of mainstream pedagogy in public schools.

In addition to acquiring knowledge about the film-making process and all that it entails, students and teachers both underlined and emphasized that the process allowed the youth to learn about themselves. One student commented about her newly acquired ability to see her errors during the filmmaking process and to correct them as she went along. But foremost among these learnings was the realization that one could actually make the film and carry it out to completion. In the student documentary, one of the students involved in *Whitiko and the Wolf* proudly and playfully exclaimed, "We can do this," to which the other responded, "Yes, we can." Learning to persevere and not give up when the process becomes challenging was an important lesson for the students. They experienced the confidence and self-efficacy that comes with facing and overcoming challenges.

Lacey's Reflection

They got to see where their edges are. When I talk about edge I mean that area, that spot, when you are doing something and get to this edge where you want to give up, where you want to quit. But they didn't.

One positive thing that must not be ignored is the fact that about 90% of the youth who participated in this project are now graduated!!!!

In this community, graduation rates fall below the provincial norms. So graduation from high school is seen as an achievement that is something to be proud of by the individual, the family, and the community. The fact that all but one of the students who participated in this course graduated is something to be celebrated. In terms of health benefits, educational

attainment is an important social determinant of life long health and “the numerous challenges that are prevalent in Aboriginal communities (e.g., abuse, suicide, decreased longevity) can be lessened by improving educational outcomes” (Parkouda & Brichta, 2013, p. 18).

Another important reward and challenge of the film experience for the youth was learning to work with others in teams and to build relationships from this experience. Some of the students took the project more seriously than did other students. For example, one student indicated certain challenges in working with her classmates, especially in terms of what she referred to as “interruptions.” The dynamic caused by differing levels of team engagement gave students the opportunity to learn to deal with frustration, problem solve, and to learn more about themselves in experiencing how they react to such circumstances.

The development of the ability to work with others is an important cultural and societal learning that can transfer to aspect of securing and sustaining employment. At the time of this writing, the teacher reported that with the exception of the one student who didn’t graduate (but has since returned to school), all the participants in this filmmaking endeavor are now gainfully employed in the community. In a community where youth unemployment numbers are extremely high, not the norm of the rest of the province and Canada, this is indeed an accomplishment. Again in terms of health benefits, employment affects earning which in turn positively affects lifelong health benefits (Howe, 2011)

Learning Values through Creative Arts: Improving Sociocultural Health by Strengthening Cultural Buffers

The late David Benjoe, a Cree researcher and artist with a project we conducted with Indigenous youth in another First Nation community, had explained what health and wellness mean in the Cree language:

You can go through all the descriptions of what makes a human being whole, but in our languages we usually just said life. It was just pimatisiwin ... When it comes to health, you have to have an understanding of who you are and where you fit in terms of your understanding of the world. So a person becomes well rounded. Health becomes, as people say, wholistic. ... Health is ... not just about [being] physically healthy, there’s also mentally healthy too. And emotionally healthy (Victor et al., 2016, p. 264).

In our research that takes place within the context of colonization, we focus on the emotional and mental health of students by striving to strengthen cultural values which enhance cultural buffers that mitigate against the effects of colonization and ongoing racism.

Delaware mental health specialist Carol Hopkins (2017) reminds those working in mental health with Indigenous communities that Indigenous values are a key aspect to any programming for Indigenous peoples. “Our identity and culture is inherently a strength” (n.p.). The incorporation of the practice of traditional cultural values in health and education enhances emotional, mental, and sociocultural health for Indigenous youth (Authors, 2014) through creating feelings of strength and well-being. Strengthening the Neehithuw values strengthens the cultural buffers against the stressors of racism and colonization (Chae & Walters, 2009; Currie et al., 2015). Collective filmmaking as a pedagogical tool reinforced aspects of traditional Neehithuw culture to counteract the cognitive imperialism of schooling thus contributing to the decolonization of this institution. First, hands-on activities and experiential learning were embedded in the classroom pedagogy of the filmmaking experience. In the past, important cultural values were learned through participation in activities, values that we see evident in the students’ filmmaking experiences. For example, the value of *sasepeneetumowin* translates as one perseveres or one who has long-term stamina in their mind – in their thinking (Authors, 2014). Both Lacey and the students commented on how students learned to persevere to overcome challenges, to problem solve, and to take a task to completion.

The use of team work to create and produce the films meant students practiced another important Neehithuw value of *mamuwihisicikewin* (working together in a concerted effort) (Victor et al., 2016). The process of students’ choosing the content of their films, writing their own story boards, and producing their films created space where students felt safe and supported to express themselves; to use their own voices. In Neehithuw child developmental theory, an important value is *tipenimisowin*: coming to have authority over oneself (Goulet & Goulet, 2015) where a person learns to make their own decisions, to act upon those decisions and to accept the responsibility for the outcome of those decisions. Student responsibility for the creation of their films gave them space to exercise independent and peer decision-making where they had authority over themselves. They were proud of their accomplishments and the community support of their creations. Practicing these cultural values, the creativity of the filmmaking process and the connections made, all developed the students’ social and emotional health, giving them the strength to go forward into their futures.

Concluding Remarks

We believe this project demonstrated the positive benefits of the arts as effective pedagogical tools to explore *pimatisiwin* (life and health) for Indigenous youth. At the same time, it raises questions about sharing authority with youth in exploring their complex lives and identities. Tuck (2009) asks us to recognize Indigenous youth’ “complex personhood” (p. 421) and afford a multiplicity of expressions of identity. As we saw in the films made by the youth, this means we need to make room for the many contradictions in youth lives that emerge from our

work with them. Engaging in interpretation of those actions is not an easy process. As authors, we ask ourselves: when students express themselves, do they need to give expression to their fears, brought on by the colonial legacy of their daily lives? Or is the focus on the negative a result of colonial beliefs of themselves and their community?

Tuck has asked us to think of working with Indigenous communities to explore multiple ways that desire and hope emerge, rather than damage. So, as teachers and facilitators, do we need to guide Indigenous youth to focus on the positive aspects of their lives – the strength and resiliency of their culture and their people? Or is there a need to enable in students the freedom to give expression to the darker side of life so as to let it go in order to explore the light and hope in their lives? We know the importance of self-determination and the need to create space for student decision-making in the process of *tipenimisowin*, but as practitioners we continue to question and explore how best to positively develop the creativity and imagination of Indigenous youth so that they may continue to make healthy life choices into the future.

Lacey's Reflections

Art begets reality. In looking to the future, I feel that artistic expression not only has the power to tell our stories, but that there exists also the power to manifest realities. Art begets reality. This is why we must be very careful in what we are creating.

What if we are just telling someone else's stories about ourselves? What if we believe these stories? What then? How do we know when we are authentically telling and imagining our own stories, and how do we discern that from the stories that others have projected onto us?

I have no answers to these questions.....but nevertheless I have chosen to continue to navigate them as a Fine Arts teacher in my school in my community. This work is important, and I will continue it with the best of my ability.

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