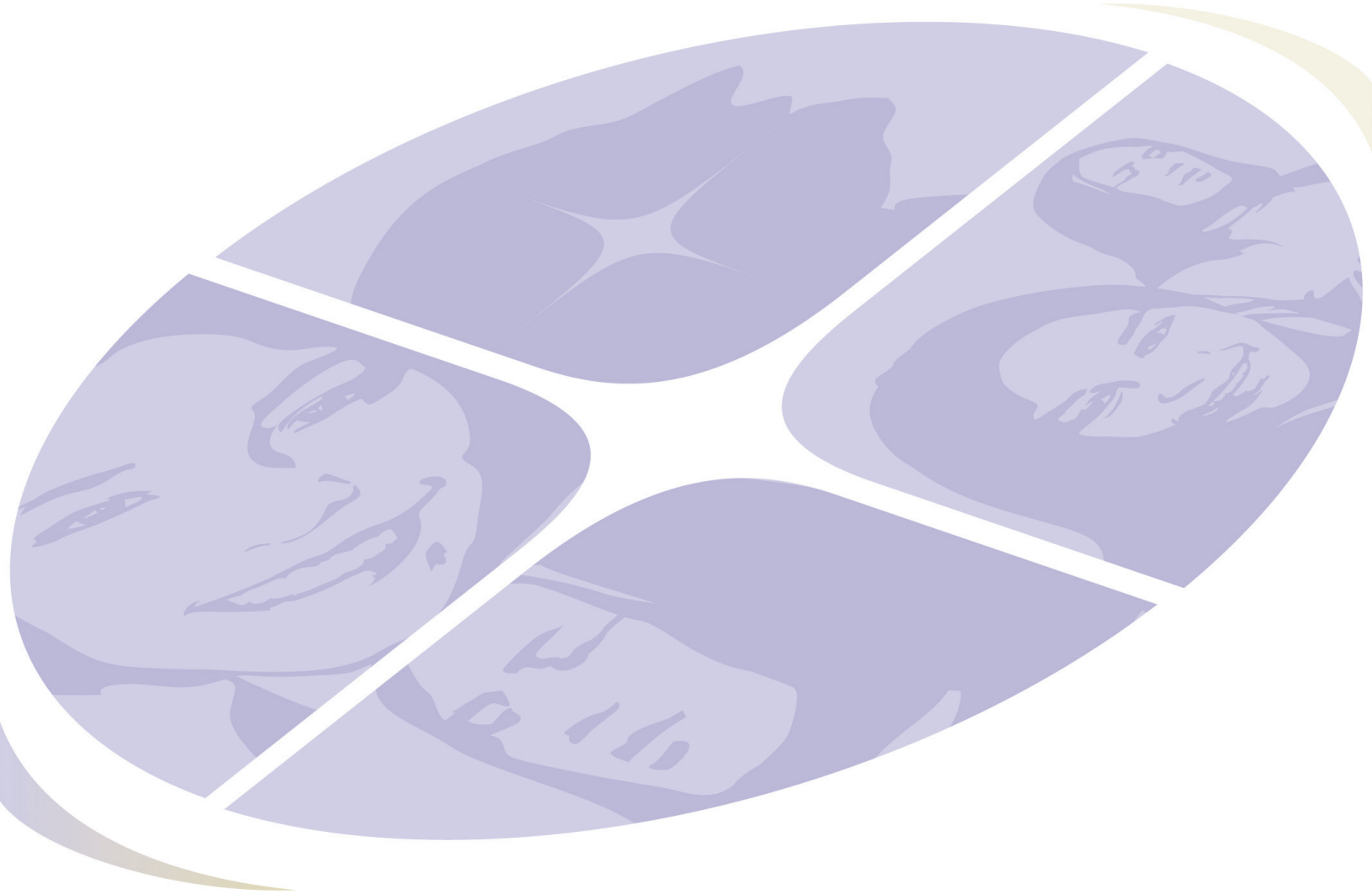
CENTRES OF EXCELLENCE FOR CHILDREN'S WELL-BEING

Youth Engagement



The Circle As Pedagogy

Creating Authentic Elder/Youth Engagement

A literature review
conducted by Dr. Shauneen Pete
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Spirit & Intent

Humans live with complexity. Intersecting and hierarchical differences based on the indicators of identity (race, class, gender, sexual orientation and others) often make cross-cultural learning challenging.

> "Only the circle can accommodate the differences between all those people" (Elder Danny Musqua, June 2004).

Introduction

Learning to navigate cross-culturally is an essential learning for all of us. In our experience Talking Circles as an approach to facilitating cross-cultural communication has been very effective. We have learned that when local elders teach traditional values to young people, a rich synergy emerges for participants that is mutually beneficial. By building relationships based on traditional values elders and young people engage in a style of communicating that cuts across the barriers imposed by age, race and experience. These partners join together in a mutually respectful manner to engage in social change. This different way of interacting is the cross-cultural experience. The story of Circle Helpers is the story that we are proud to share with others.

> "Good acts done for the sake of children make stories good for the ears of those around the council fire…" adapted from Indian Wisdom (1998).

The Researchers Journey

For me as the Aboriginal researcher the cross-cultural experience was the process. It was in the constant reminder to self to return to the teachings, to remember to use protocol respectfully, and to pay attention to the natural flow attached to the act of documentation. Throughout this process I had to ask

myself questions about which research was I privileging for inclusion, which works were discarded, and frequently, I asked myself “why?”

This ‘‘checking in’’ for the purposes of verification of intent is an essential decolonizing move. As decolonizing practice (Binda, 2001) this choice embodies “the researching, reclaiming and restaging of uniquely First Nations Protocols, philosophies, ceremonies, rights, responsibilities and ways of life” (p. 2). This move recognizes the power dynamics at play, in the very political arena of schooling, and the education of our young.

To counteract some of the politicizing I reclaimed an insider position by reflecting on our collective journey through Circle Helpers. I re-examined our annual reports submitted to the Centre of Excellence. I met with Laura Wasacase, Danny Musqua, and Del Williams, as well as our Circle Helpers Youth, Kedane, Virginia, Rodney, Bonnie. We discussed protocol for how to proceed. We confirmed our intentions. My partners verified for me the direction this work should go. Once again, affirming that for us, wisdom came in our collective actions, not primarily through a research foundation. Yet at the same time, we reaffirmed the value that acknowledging a research foundation would have for us all, especially when it came time to advocate for this approach broadly.

I continued to gather together books that focused on Aboriginal education, healing, youth, youth engagement programs, youth and justice. However, an initial scan of these materials illuminated little in the way of concrete ideas to facilitate changes in cross-cultural practices. To compensate, I quickly expanded my search to include books and papers on cross-cultural practices, cultural competence, the Medicine Wheel teachings, Aboriginal women, and health care practitioner training. Additionally, I conducted an extensive Internet search for these topics.

This literature review is grounded in research contributions from the fields of education, social work, justice, health, and sociology. The literature in this review is informed by themes associated with identity development theories, multiculturalism, postcolonial theory, critical race theories, and Indigenous knowledge ways.

Normalizing Indigenous Knowledge

Multiple authors have critiqued the contrasts between dominant Western and Indigenous worldviews (Bear Nicholas, 2001; Ermine, 1995; Graveline, 1998; Kirkness, 1992; Grant & Gillespie, 1993; Smith, 2001, Walker, 2001). These two ways of knowing are often treated dichotomously. Research on this topic usually compares historical and more contemporary (postcolonial) tensions.

Key points include the dominance of Eurocentric thought and alternatively the devaluing and displacing of Indigenous worldviews (Bear Nicholas, 2001; Ermine, 1995; Smith, 2001). Graveline (1998) labels the devaluing and displacing action as pedagogical violence (p. 26). While Smith (2001), Bear Nicholson (2001) and Ermine (1995) assert that Western traditions are fragmented and share an outward focus on change, these authors also remind us that Indigenous worldviews are holistic and 'inward' in form (Ermine, 1995; Graveline, 1998; Hampton, 1995; Smith, 2001; Weenie, 1998).

Holistic frameworks are advocated by Ermine (1995), Graveline (1998) Hampton (1995), Calliou (1995), Poonwassie & Charter (2001) and many other academics. These conceptual frames pose traditional models of education and healing rooted in Indigenous knowledge ways. Some authors refer to the Medicine Wheel as a framework for their theorizing (Calliou, 1995; Hampton, 1995; Graveline 1998). Battiste & Barman (1995), Weenie (1998) and Regnier (1995) all utilize the sacred circle as an organizational tool as they work to redefine Aboriginal Education. Regardless of whether you call it the circle, or medicine wheel this imagery plays prominently in Indigenous theorizing. Let us return to traditional wisdom for a moment:

> "You have noticed that everything an Indian does is in a circle, and that is because the Power of the World always works in circles, and everything tries to be round. Everything the Power of the World does is done in a circle…" (Black Elk, Oglala Lakota, 1930)

The Medicine Wheel is commonly understood to symbolically represent the four races of man, the four directions, the four elements, four aspects etc. (Bopp, Bopp, Brown, Lane Jr. 1954). The authors write, "the medicine wheel can be used to help us see or understand things we can't quite see or understand because they are ideas and not physical objects" (The Sacred Tree, p. 9).

This set of beliefs can form a foundation for cross-cultural negotiating that has the potential to lead to our collective healing. The Medicine Wheel teachings can help both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples to bridge Indigenous and Eurocentric worldviews… in this manner we can heal from the dichotomy we have been socialized to.

In my role as cross-cultural educator treating these knowledge ways as dichotomous is problematic. I feel that left alone, this treatment contributes to a power struggle for dominance. Perhaps a time will come when it is no longer necessary for us to illuminate the contradictions of the two opposing worldviews. Perhaps we will no longer need to defend the inclusion of our Indigenous knowledge ways in our research. However, at this time few individuals in mainstream communities acknowledge or understand the distinctiveness of Indigenous ways of knowing. A complete discussion on Indigenous knowledge

ways, and the Medicine Wheel teachings were not the primary purpose of this literature review; I purposely chose to go no further with this discussion. Though let it be understood that these concepts ground much of the work that will follow.

My primary purpose in writing this literature review was to bridge two key concepts: Youth/Elder Engagement and cross-cultural educating in order to define more authentic cross-cultural youth/elder engagement. Our central question is: How do we facilitate conversation between diverse youth, and youth and elders from differing backgrounds so that the individuals gain cultural competencies (Cross, 1988) that may enhance the way that we work together?

Normalizing ambiguity

If we want young people to gain cross-cultural competencies we need to create the conditions for this learning to take place. Yet, there is little in the aforementioned scholarship, which informs praxis on how to facilitate the kinds of cross-cultural work that we are suggesting. Teachers often comment that they haven't got the resources, or the knowledge to teach in this manner. This first admission is the first step in the cultural negotiation.

Ghosh (1996) wrote, "Teaching only creates conditions for learning to take place; it cannot cause learning. Therefore, teaching and learning are not directly connected. Rather, the teaching process is ambivalent and ambiguous" (p. 94). Living with the ambiguity of what needs to be done, could be done, and should be done right now is often difficult for us. We would like to think that we have some control over these factors, but the fact of the matter is that there really are no concrete answers to many of societies complexities… there are only the things we try in practice. With this practice there is uncertainty: the ambiguity is normal.

Therefore, once again we have to expand our circle of references in regard to this subject. Lets continue by examining the following key themes: youth engagement, cross-cultural competence, cross-cultural elder-youth engagement and finally circles as pedagogy.

Youth Engagement

We know that as adults working with young people we would like the conditions we choose to reflect some key understandings about the purposes of youth engagement. The Centre of Excellence for Youth Engagement is a nation-wide collaboration of partners, led by The Students Commission. They are committed to understanding and encouraging youth engagement. The Centre has been instrumental in developing information and research on topics

associated with youth engagement. We can use the information published by the Commission to inform some of our decision-making about processes to engage youth.

The Centre believes: “youth engagement is the meaningful and sustained involvement of a young person in activity focusing outside the self”. The activities themselves can include a wide range of options (sport, music, political work etc). Engagement is achieved when caring adults “create a sense of belonging, and youth feel connected to the activity”. Additionally the Centre’s literature states engagement is the “opportunity to grow individually through meaningful interaction with others, and giving oneself toward a common goal. This ongoing process is unique to one’s personal experience and leads to empowerment” (2004). Two key outcomes of the chosen activity include: Youth gain a sense of accomplishment and competence, and youth engagement leads to empowerment (adapted from the Center of Excellence For Youth Engagement, 2004).

Empowerment “involves having the authority or power to make decisions about projects concerning one’s self. Empowerment takes place when the process of participation increases and improves the capacity of individuals and communities to effect social change. The result is a sense of ownership and responsibility” (2004). To be empowered is to know about the choices you can make, and then to choose accordingly.

Empowered youth are those who know who they are (race, class, gender, sexual orientation and other indicators of identity). Engaged youth as empowered beings tend to choose positive lifestyle choices including decreased drug and alcohol usage, lower rates of school failure and dropping out. Engagement work would be ideally suited for those youth that we have come to label as ‘‘at-risk’’, a broad group which the literature states includes: youth marginalized because of race, class, sexual orientation, and many other indicators. These interconnecting differences suggest to us that we may need to expand the manner in which we view engagement. In particular we identified a need for an exploration into cross-cultural communication as an approach to supporting youth engagement.

The Circle Helpers pilot project of Youth Launch is based on a Cross-Cultural Communication Model of Engagement (Williams & Wasacase, 2004). Elder and Spiritual Teacher, Laura Wasacase (Kahkewistahaw First Nation, Saskatchewan) taught youth how to conduct sharing circles as a means of creating cross-cultural communication opportunities, understanding and mutual respect. This approach is in line with approaches already advocated for through the Youth Launch program. According to the Youth Facilitation Leadership Program guidebook, the discussion circle is the model used for dialogue. The guidebook states, “The circle model allows for creating opportunities for diversity.

Young people from a variety of backgrounds can sit and discuss topics together and begin to appreciate each others' issues". This model of cross-cultural communication has been found to aid in the development of cross-cultural competencies.

Building Cross-cultural Competencies

Building cross-cultural competence (Messina, 1994; Cross et al, 1989) in youth is an essential exercise leading to their empowerment. Cultural competence refers to:

> "a set of congruent behaviors, attitudes, and policies that are present in a system, agency, or individual to enable that system, agency, or individual to function effectively in interactions with people from a variety of cultural backgrounds. Cultural competence is the ability of human beings to authentically relate to one another with acknowledgement, appreciation, and respect." (Minnesota Department of Health, 2004)

Therefore, building cultural competence includes those actions that are initiated to support individual growth. In the handbook entitled: A Youth Leaders Guide to Building Cultural Competence written by Messina (1994), the author states:

> "The term (cultural competence) goes beyond *'cultural awareness'* (knowledge about a particular group) and '*cultural sensitivity*' (knowledge as well as some level of experience with a group other than one's own). Gaining cultural competence is a long-term, developmental process. It is an exciting, engaging, lifelong process of expanding horizons, thinking critically about issues of power and oppression and acting appropriately. Culturally competent individuals have a mixture of beliefs/attitudes; knowledge and skills that help them establish trust and communicate with others." (P. 2)

Culturally competent individuals have the ability to make choices given the new information/experiences that they have. Smith (2001) outlines four negotiations undertaken by individuals given their interaction in new experiences. These include:

1. Individuals retain their own perspective and reject other perspectives;
2. Individuals hold onto their original idea, and adopt another perspective temporarily i.e.: hold two conceptions simultaneously;
3. Individuals reject the original perspectives and adopt a new perspective;

4. Individuals reject the original perspective, and those put forth by others, adopting instead an alternative which goes beyond any of them (p. 85).

Exposing youth to a multiple of perspectives may help them to develop a stronger sense of self (Smith, 2001). Holistic approaches to education, those that require youth to gain cultural competencies to negotiate between differing worldviews, have the power to create and develop in young people the ability to be bi-cultural. In turn they may develop new ideas about other peoples, and this may result in new ways of interacting with others across the boundaries of race, class, and sexual orientation. Additionally, we posit that cross-cultural communication may aid in boundary crossing in particular providing youth with the skills and knowledge to interact with community elders, thus crossing age barriers as well.

What is Cross-cultural Youth/Elder Engagement?

As adults working to facilitate youth engagement and with an awareness of the changing demographics in our province, we made the powerful choice to try to be inclusive in our practices. We voiced a strong desire to bridge the gap between youth and elders in our community. However, initially we found few resources from which to gain knowledge on how to cut across the boundaries imposed by age. As a result, we had to turn to our own reflective practices for insights gained in the process of crossing these boundaries. Williams (2003) reflected, “we are committed to creating opportunities for all youth to engage with Elders, participate in traditional events and ceremonies, learn respectful protocols and break down barriers between, and amongst diverse peoples”. Before these transformative outcomes could be met, we had some reflective practices of our own to undertake. We first had to admit to our own collective ‘‘not-knowing’’.

In a humble manner, we began to learn in a dynamic and interactive fashion from some Elders in our community. After an omission on our part, a local elder approached us, and thus began our relationship with Laura Wasacase. She challenged us to consider a cross-cultural approach to our work. She reminded us that cross-cultural approaches are not only about what we learn (content) about the other, but what we do (processes) differently to facilitate change.

Our first teaching required us (the adults) to learn from elders the appropriate way to ask for help. We were taught that such requests were often accompanied by a gift of tobacco. We were learning that this was a respectful approach for accessing elders within our community. Yet we also understood that protocol might look different in other locations, and with other elders. Learning to gain access to elders became for us, the first cross-cultural lesson.

Upon accepting our gifts and our requests for assistance the elders began to inform the manner in which our program operated. Williams (2004) wrote, “Engaging elders to lead youth circles is an opportunity to share their wisdom and knowledge of traditional teachings in relation to healing, spirituality, kinship and healthy community relations”. Youth are taught by local elders to recognize the uniqueness of Indigenous worldviews. The Elders spoke with youth about the teachings of the four directions, protocol, and other practices (the pipe, smudge and circle).

From this foundational relationship youth and elders began to put into practice what they had learned. Collectively, we worked on our first circle. Williams reflected, “The Circle, led by Elders who support our work and assisted by trained circle helpers from the Youth Launch team, involved a process of sharing perspectives and traditional practices based on the teachings of the four directions” (2004). Elders and youth in this setting moved quickly from learning about, to applying what was learned in new locations. These engagement activities resulted in the emergence of strong empowered voices. We feel that contributions such as these add depth to the exploration of community engagement broadly and more specifically elder/youth engagement. The question remained how then to ensure the development of culturally competent community engagement?

The Community Engagement literature (Minnesota Department of Health, 2004; National Center for Cultural Competence, 2004) outlined key features of culturally competent models of community engagement. In these references they used the word “organization” to mean the group of individuals who join together to work towards a collectively defined goal. Some key features of these organizations include:

1. Respects the unique, culturally defined needs of various populations
2. Acknowledges culture as a predominant force in shaping behaviors, values, and institutions
3. Values natural systems (family, community, church, healers etc) as mechanisms of support for the population
4. Believes that diversity within cultures is as important as diversity between cultures

In addition to these features outlined above we found that facilitating elder/youth engagement had mutually beneficial outcomes for us as individuals and as a community.

Ghosh (1996) posed a continuum of cross-cultural awareness that was helpful in judging the outcomes for our work. As individuals we learned a great

deal about our own individual self, a process that required us to use reflective practices as we identified our own belief's values and attitudes (Ghosh, 1996). We learned about self in relation to others by comparing our beliefs attitudes and values to those expressed by other people (Ghosh, 1996). We learned to undercut preconceived notions about age, gender, and ethnicity. As individuals and as separate "groups" we learned new things about each other's perspectives. We grew to be accepting of our collective diversity.

As a community, we learned to listen in a good way to the diverse voices. We began to set aside individualistic goals of competition and focused more on collective good. We shared in the construction of collective wisdom. As a community, we imagined a new way of being for the next generations. As an empowered community, we began to inform change in new locations. As a group we utilized reflective practice to check for our effectiveness. The circle as pedagogy (Graveline, 1998) had become praxis.

The Circle as Pedagogy

Seeking literature on the topic of Talking Circles was an elusive process. What little literature there was provided very little analysis and more of a descriptive presentation of what circles were and how they could be conducted. For example, Cowan & Adams (2002) examined the Talking Circle as Pedagogy within a business school context in the United States. These authors state that while,

> "talking Circles have been utilized broadly within Indigenous communities for thousands of years … the use of circles have never been integrated into mainstream education ironically, perhaps because it is inclusive and thus inconsistent with the foundations of western philosophy" (p. 3).

In this case talking circles are described as, "highly effective processes of inclusion and integration [which] are not new" (p. 3). Talking circles as pedagogy facilitates integrative conversation. Cowan and Adams (2002) state, "Integrative conversation involves the exchange and creation of new meaning…" (p. 3). They continue by adding, " An integrative conversation is a genuine exchange of ideas, feelings, perspectives, opinions, and so forth, where for each person involved there emerges a sense of self as part of the whole" (p. 3). Unlike other systems of communication, talking circles are not intended to create competition as in the western tradition. Individuals through the practice of listening and sharing, work collectively to create new meanings within the group. In turn, individuals turn from concerns on the personal level, to collective concerns: away from competition to

individuals contributing as a part of a larger community. This shift from competitive to inclusive is the cross-cultural move.

Talking Circles are also being utilized in a number of different sites across a number of differing professional fields. In Minnesota, the Department of Health is utilizing talking circle methodology as a means to acquire narrative insights into the integrated health needs of women living in poverty (Minnesota Department of Health). In Vancouver talking circles are used to engage AIDS patients in dialogue about the quality of hospice care they are receiving. In Georgetown, Mental Health Practitioners are using talking circles as a means of organizing ‘‘book talks’’ about ‘‘isms’’ (classism, sexism, racism etc) in their workplace. At Calvin College student affairs administrators have organized a number of different circles to assist students and faculty in identifying and combating institutional forms of racism on their campus. In British Columbia, the Treaty Commission (BC Treaty Commission, 2004) is modeling the use of talking circles as a means of exploring and advocating for First Nations women's access to information on the Treaty making process. In all of these locations, regardless of who the participants are the intention is to maximize the knowledge of the participants for collective empowerment.

Graveline (1998) uses circles as a means of analysis within her university coursework on cross-cultural issues. Through their participation in the circles students are asked to reflect on their own personal "story" in relation to race, and other identity indicators. She explains that both journaling and storytelling within the circle are essential means of supporting healing and holism for individuals, and also for communities. In her cross-cultural work, she explores the boundaries that are maintained based on race, class, gender, age and other indicators of identity. She explains,

> "Circle work is one form of breathing new life into the spirit of human interchange. Through Circle we are able to gain inspiration, renew personal vision and recreate a cohesive community. The circle can act to deconstruct the Western dualism of individualism/community by allowing us to work individually, in a transpersonal context, while building community. Establishing a cohesive circle is an integral part of re-establishing interconnectedness" (p. 131).

Ultimately, her goal is to build community across diversity.

From the analysis of this small literature base we can see how the use of talking circles is moving slowly into the mainstream. From this brief analysis I can generalize that talking circles as pedagogy are designed for individual and collective empowerment, and core to that empowerment are concerns for individual and collective healing.

Additional examinations of the literature showed a small number of references that were descriptive in manner. Saskatchewan Learning curriculum documents (2004) state, “The basic rule of thumb for conducting the talking circle is that individuals will be asked to join together in a circle. Each person will be asked to respond in his or her own words, and from the heart, in response to a given topic”. From the website Turning Points (2001) I found another definition of the talking circle:

> “In many indigenous traditions there is a process of coming to a group decision or understanding that is known as a talking circle. Each person is welcome to speak freely and as passionately as he or she wishes, without interruption, but is also expected to treat all other speakers with respect even when he or she disagrees with them, and to acknowledge and build on previous speakers' ideas, so that there is an increasingly rich accumulation of thought and a building of consensus. Help us to find common ground upon which to stand together and move forward in a more co-operative spirit.″

Cowan & Adams (2002) briefly outline how the circle unfolds. They state:

> “participants sit in a circle in order to see and hear everyone, not just a ‘teacher’... the [process] begins with an identification of purpose and someone taking the lead to talk. Often a Talking Circle begins with whomever is seated in the East, which is the direction that symbolizes the start of a new day…each person, in turn and clockwise, shares openly and honestly and then passes to the next person—often by handing forward a ‘talking stick’ … until everyone has had a chance to contribute (p. 4)”.

Other formulas for conducting a circle were offered, however, for me, there was something quite unsettling about seeing it written in printed form.

Research Problematic:

Once again as the cross-cultural researcher I found the inclusion of these ‘‘how-to’s’’ problematic. After much time of personal discomfort, I realized that I was uncomfortable with the documentation of what I had learned were traditional practices – and therefore tied to particular forms of protocol and practices within my community. For me, my guts were saying, “this is wrong…this is an elders teaching”. New questions formed in my heart. Perhaps the lack of literature on this topic was not so much because of its challenge to mainstream knowing but out of respect for the sacredness of the exchange of knowledge processes. After much thought, and after seeking insights from my elder/mentors I have decided that in order to complete this literature review I would decline the inclusion of our

practices in this paper. For me, I came to the conclusion that I had not earned the right to “give this information away”, and therefore to include instructions in this paper would be a breach of protocol. Elder Laura Wasacase has often reminded me to listen to my inner wisdom and to have faith in this knowing. I am learning to trust my gut.

However, as the scholar I am concerned that I may leave you discouraged about how you and your own organizations may use these processes. So I will leave you with this: Engage in reflective practices about your own cultural competencies. Find allies in your organizations that know traditional peoples. In a humble manner approach these allies for information on local protocol. Tell them of your own journey, and then ask for guidance. Trust that when you ask that teachers will emerge for you. When they share the local protocol knowledge respect the teachings and hold them with care. Seek out the wisdom of elders by ‘‘doing protocol’’ with them to identify local knowledge and practices. Invest your time in these relationships. Work towards cultivating mutually beneficial relationships with local traditional peoples, and work towards asking questions about how things could be done in a different manner in your community. Remember, this takes time. In the end the investment is worth every effort. Join us in the process of cross-cultural negotiation for the sake of individual and collective healing and empowerment; what have you got to lose? What will youth in your community gain from your own negotiations?

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