

# Learning Indigenous methodologies

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This paper recounts the author's own experiences as they relate to some of the key principles in the literature about Indigenous thinking and methodologies for research, learning, and teaching. Since story and situating the researcher are two Indigenous methodologies, the paper is organised around five stories of the author's experiences learning Indigenous methodologies as she worked with an Indigenous community in Cameroon. The stories illustrate the Indigenous methodologies of relationships and decolonising, language and land, spirituality and healing, process, connectedness, and music and finally, team, respect and transformation. Purpose and responsibility for the outcomes of the research are discussed in a section that looks back over her whole experience. The paper ends with a challenge to academia to adopt Indigenous methodologies in research.

*Keywords: Indigenous methodologies; Indigenous ways of teaching and learning; Indigenous research methodologies; story*

## 1 Introduction

Just before I left for Africa to work with an Indigenous community in Cameroon,<sup>1</sup> an anthropologist friend who had worked in Cameroon advised me, "When you go to Africa, don't go as a teacher; you will never survive. Go as a learner and you will do well." I took his advice, and I am glad for it. Years later, when I moved into the Mi'kmaq region in Eastern Canada, I kept that attitude and am known as a learner of Mi'kmaq in the community. I like that role.

There is quite a bit of literature on Indigenous ways of thinking and methods of teaching and learning.<sup>2</sup> This paper illustrates my experience as it relates to some of the key points about Indigenous methodologies in the

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<sup>1</sup> I worked in language development and translation with SIL International.

<sup>2</sup> Key readings on Indigenous learning and teaching include Ahenakew (2016), Absolon (2011), Archibald (2008), Battiste (2002, 2013), Chilisa (2011), Gone (2019), Grande (2008), Hall & Cusack (2018), Hinton (2011, 2013), Kovach (2006), Parker (2012), Ryder et al. (2020), Sanford et al. (2012), Smith (2012), Smith et al. (2016), Snow et al. (2016), Walter & Suina (2019), Wilson (2005), Wilson (2007), and Windchief & San Pedro (2019). Specific applications to Mi'kmaw include Bartlett (2011), Borden (2011), and Metallic (2009).

literature. I use two of the Indigenous methodologies I have learned – story and situating myself in it.<sup>3</sup> My father was Mennonite and my mom a mix of German and Scottish. My dad’s first language was Plautdietch, Low German, as he called it. He only learned English when he went to school at age seven. He moved out of the region and he never taught Low German to me or my sister. He lost his language by the time he was 55. I think my family situation sparked my interest in linguistics. I tell my own story of learning Indigenous methodologies when I lived and worked in the domains of language development and translation with the Moloko, an Indigenous group about 10,000 strong in the Far North Province of Cameroon (Friesen et al. 2017).

Stories are who we are. They are both method and meaning. (Kovach, 2010, p. 108)

Situating oneself is an essential part of Indigenous research. (Parker, 2012, p. 4)

## 2 Relationships and decolonising

Research, like life, is about relationships. (Kovach, 2015, p. 50)

Post colonial? There is nothing post about it. (Kovach, 2010, p. 76)

I worked with David,<sup>4</sup> one of my first Moloko colleagues, daily when I was in Maroua, the local city. David was my major language teacher, and since he is bilingual in French too, he was also my advisor in all things cultural and linguistic. He was already a song leader in the community. He became a literacy teacher and we worked together to make some of the first literacy books for Moloko.

In the early days of working together, David was polite and friendly, but his speech was peppered with “*nous les nègres ... et vous les blanches*” (we the negroes ... and you the whites). Almost every sentence, it seemed, contained what sounded to me like self-derogatory phrases. I really had a hard time to concentrate, I found it so distressing. After a while, I tried something that I hoped would indicate that I honoured him; I invited myself over for lunch after church. That is the way you

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<sup>3</sup> “Locating oneself honours the personal among the collective” (Kovach, 2010, p. 112). “Self-location anchors knowledge within experiences, and these experiences greatly influence interpretations.” (Kovach, 2010, p. 111). In many Indigenous dissertations, the researcher first introduces themselves and inserts themselves, their family, and their history into the presentation of their research (Johnson 2014; McIvor 2012; Michel 2012; Rosborough 2012, Thompson 2012). Story works in that it is up to the listener to piece together a lesson from the story and to apply the pieces to their current situation (Wilson, 2008, p. 123). “Story as methodology is decolonizing research” (Kovach, 2009, p.103).

<sup>4</sup> David is not his real name. I keep his name out of print for cultural reasons and out of respect for my colleague.

are supposed to do it in Moloko. The greatest gift you can give someone is the gift of yourself – a visit. So, you go over to someone’s house and you hang around until mealtime. This was way out of my comfort zone but I did it one day. I hung around for quite some time before he finally whispered to me, “We have nothing to eat.” Quite embarrassed, I went home. But he had seen my intention, and every other Sunday after church I was expected to come to his house and eat. And I did. Gradually, as the weeks and months went by and we continued to work together, his language changed, as he said, “*nous les noirs ... et vous les blanches*” (we the blacks ... and you the whites). Then it became “*nous les Camerounais ... et vous les Canadiennes*” (we the Cameroonians ... and you the Canadians). I kind of liked that one. Eventually after a while I realized that he wasn’t using any comparatives anymore. Something had changed.

When we finally published the literacy booklet, we passed the draft by the literacy consultant in the organisation who advised us and helped us to improve the document for publication. After she looked at it, she called me aside and chided me. I had put my name only as author, with the idea that the author in a ‘real academic’ publication is the one with the pen, the one who writes on the paper. She told me, “Put David’s name as first author, and yours as second.” I did, grudgingly at the time. Since then, I have realised that his input as expert in the Moloko language was far greater than mine as linguist and I have continued the practice.<sup>5</sup>

### 3 Language and the land

One of the things that Indigenous families want in education is to maintain a relationship with the land – to find a new way of relating to the land, since the old way is impossible. (Lorna Williams, personal communication, 2014)

The need for so many of us to not only learn what was taken from us [the language, people, land, and ancestors], but also to try to mend that tear for future generations by revitalizing our language. For many Indigenous researchers, we are using research to do just that. (Thompson, 2012, p. 9)<sup>6</sup>

I grew peanuts and kept chickens in the same way that Moloko women did. I lived in a mud-brick house with a thatched roof. You couldn’t tell my house from any of my neighbours, at least until you got close. Then you would see that I had big glass windows with screens to keep the malaria mosquitoes out, cement floors, and

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<sup>5</sup> “Language is extremely political” (Lorna Williams 2014, personal communication). “No matter how it is positioned, a decolonizing attitude must be incorporated within contemporary explorations of Indigenous inquiry” (Kovach 2010: 81). “Knowledge is relational ... it is not the realities in and of themselves that are important. It is the relationship that I share with reality” (Wilson 2008: 74).

<sup>6</sup> “Living on the land ... learning from the land ... belonging to the land ... respecting the land” (Parker, 2012, p. 27).

a kitchen that looked nothing like theirs. Actually, it didn't look much like a Canadian kitchen either, but it served my needs. I had heard that successful language projects happened when expatriates came and identified with the local people as best as they could – lived with them in their villages, dressed in the cultural way, ate their foods, drank their water. I visited my neighbours and they came over to see me – just to sit and talk or to eat together. They came over to get medicine or to ask for a ride to town the next time I was going. Some of the local kids visited me in the evening because they wanted to learn to read Moloko and they weren't allowed to attend the adult classes offered by the Moloko literacy committee (they only learned French in school). I kept ducks at one point without much success. My dog ate one and another died of the bird flu that went through every year. When a third one died, one of my friends said, "*Andibobo ango amitamat*" 'your ducks keep dying.' She used a reduplicated form of the verb 'it dies' that I had never heard before. I said, "Can you repeat that?" and discovered for myself a verb conjugation that I knew probably existed but had never been able to elicit.

#### 4 Spirituality and healing

I was focussing so intently on how the sacred comes into research that I almost missed how the sacred is our research. (Kovach, 2009, p. 183)

It is vital that healing take place concurrently with language revitalization. (Thompson, 2012, p. 192)<sup>7</sup>

When I moved into the Moloko region, one of my first jobs was to work with a committee of Moloko men to decide how they wanted to write their language. We met every two weeks for about six months to slowly wrestle through different orthography issues, issues like what letters to choose for their different sounds, how to divide up words, how to spell words which change dramatically depending on whether you say a sentence slowly or at regular speed. It is a complex process! Each week I expected that we would finish, but every week we'd get bogged down in some issue and the time would fly and we'd be almost as far away from finishing as when we started (or so it seemed). When we were wrapping up yet another session, they said, "We have a proposal to make, since we come each time and yet we can never seem to finish the work." I expected them to complain. Imagine my shock when they asked to meet for an intensive two-day marathon of work. "Do you think we could finish that way?" they asked. I said, smiling, that I thought we might. So, we planned an orthography sleepover at my team mates' house – lots of good food (rice and meat sauce, with fresh dates and peanuts to munch on), a newly painted blackboard to write on, and enthusiasm to spare. We did finish! The first evening, we got through all the remaining major issues, so that the next day we could review and prepare for testing the orthography in the community.

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<sup>7</sup> Johnson (2014, p. 137) advises that along with language learning for adults, that talking circles in English be incorporated into the language revitalization program, for healing.

After the first day of work, the men slept in the living room – the same room in which we had been working.

What do people do when they are left for a night in a room with a blackboard, when they have just developed a writing system for their language? Well, they don't sleep! They wrote messages back and forth to one another – in Moloko, of course – funny ones, wise ones, insulting ones; you name it, until the wee hours of the morning. Finally, one person wrote, “I don't want to hear any more words! May God give us all a peaceful rest.”

The next morning, we tested all the decisions we had made over the past weeks by having each person write a short story and read another story out loud. While each person was away in the test room, the others wrote more on the blackboard. These activities helped us evaluate the writing system.

Later in the day, one of the men working on the orthography said to me, “It's going to rain today.” Rainfall levels had been dangerously low that year, and partial crop failure was imminent unless we got some rain. I asked him why he said that. He replied, “Today we are finishing our alphabet talks, so that the Moloko language can be written down for the first time ever. God has certainly blessed us, and He will also send us rain.” Sure enough, right after the men left to go home, the wind whipped up and it poured for hours. The parched ground was now muddy, the dried-up millet stalks greening again, grains swelling with sweet water. Until that day, I never thought of working on an alphabet as being a spiritual work.

## 5 Process, connectedness, and music

Music is the voice of the universe ... Everyone has a song. (Lorna Williams, 2014, personal communication)

In Mi'kmaq, everyone and everything is part of a whole. (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 55)

When I first moved into the Moloko community, I joined the Moloko praise group. Every couple of months they would have a praise day, where hundreds of Moloko would converge on one church for a day of praising God. They sang in Moloko and danced. It was wonderful. They were making a songbook that contained all of the songs they had written in their language for praise. Actually, they already had a draft of it typed in the computer by the time I arrived to Cameroon – they had taken the testing orthography that an expatriate phonologist had worked out with them and applied it to writing down their songs. When they saw my interest, they invited me to a committee meeting. Now, I wanted to contribute to language development but I don't really like committee meetings. I went though, and the first thing they said at the meeting was, “We want to publish our hymnbook!” I said, “Hey, I only just got here, and we have to work through the orthography issues, and it takes time, and I have to learn how to speak some Moloko.” They said, “You whites have been here since 1992 and we want some fruit! You plant a

tree and you expect to get fruit sometime soon. We want to see some fruit!” Now, 1992 was when the first language survey was done in the area – the first expatriate linguists from the organisation didn’t move there until 1995, and this was 1998 and I had just arrived. Well, by the end of the meeting, I promised that I would do everything I could to get that praise book published. As it turned out, working through the songbook was the greatest way to work through the orthography issues that we faced. Another benefit was that I learned so much language by singing the songs as I danced in the circle with the group.

I stayed with the praise group throughout my time in Cameroon. At one meeting I was overjoyed to hear a Moloko artist in the group suggest that the minutes of the meetings be written in the Moloko language. He said, “Why should we use French for the minutes when we can write in Moloko now?”

## 6 Team, respect, and transformation

It will be recognized that transformation within every living entity participating in the research will be one of the outcomes of every project. (Wilson, 2007, p. 195)

Knowledge is shared and relational, and this research should be conducted with methods that carry relational accountability which holds the researcher accountable for fulfilling a responsibility to all relationships with the natural environment. (Gail Dana-Sacco, from Thompson, 2012, p. 83)<sup>8</sup>

One of the easy readers that the Moloko published turned out to be a hit with the children. It is originally a story from Chad, a neighbouring country, and it is one that a Canadian mother would *never* read to her children. It is about a goat that is always hungry, and who goes around eating things he shouldn’t. He just never is fully satisfied. First the children chase him away, then the women. Then, after he eats even more precious things, the men decide that *they* are hungry! They catch and kill the goat, roast him, and eat him. They are the ones who are fully satisfied in the end.

The translators and I worked hard to translate and improve this story, reading it to people and getting their reactions, and editing the story accordingly so that it was well-told in Moloko. Finally, we published it and printed 200 copies. We decided to sell it for just 25cfa (equivalent to a Canadian nickel) to encourage people to buy it. We took some copies to a revisers meeting. Normally we would wait for an hour or so for all the delegates to arrive, and meanwhile, many people would gather around to see what was happening in their church. We took the moment to read them a few of the newly-published books, including the goat story. Well, all day long, throughout the meeting, mothers and children came with their 25cfa to buy the book. Then we could see them outside, reading the story to their

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<sup>8</sup> This is research “that is conducted **for**, **with**, and **by** the language-speaking community” (Czaykowska-Higgins, 2009, p. 24).

neighbours, and laughing. Within the next few minutes, another child or mother would arrive with 25cfa to buy ‘that goat book.’ When the day was done, we had sold 50 copies!

At the last revisers meeting I attended before going back to Canada for a few months, the same thing happened. When our meeting was over that day, the village schoolteacher came into the church. He said, “All day long I have seen my students reading a little green book, and I can see that they are interested in reading. What are you doing here, and what is this little green book?” The translators and revisers explained, and one of the church members bought the teacher a book so he could have one for himself.

We ended up by printing 1000 copies of the book. These sold out in record time.<sup>9</sup>

## 7 Purpose, responsibility for the outcomes of the research

Knowing why we are carrying out research – our motive – has the potential to take us to places that involve both the head and the heart. We need to know our own research story to be accountable to self and community. (Kovach, 2009, p. 120)

It is advisable that a researcher work as part of a team of Indigenous scholars/thinkers and with the guidance of elder(s) or knowledge-keepers. (Wilson, 2007, p. 195)<sup>10</sup>

I left Cameroon and the Moloko communities in January of 2008, intending to be away for only seven months. I haven’t been back since. In 2008, I joined a colleague in my organisation who was working with Mi’kmaq communities in my home region of Canada, and have been invested here since then. I have worked in spurts on the Moloko grammar, encouraged and supported by a linguistic consultant in my organisation. The grammar grew from a sketch of some 60 pages

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<sup>9</sup> Battiste & Youngblood (2000, p. 86) notes that “no force has been more effective in oppressing Indigenous knowledge and heritage than the education system.” What better place to empower Indigenous communities now than in the education system? In an excellent report on polysynthetic language structures and curriculum, Sarah Kell (2014, p. 44) quotes Barry Montour to make a case for the need for linguistic study in education. Montour says, “It is imperative that linguists with expertise in both polysynthesis and second language learning theories work in collaboration with First Nation communities to design a research framework and select appropriate methods to investigate how second language learners acquire a polysynthetic language. ... This will lead to new theories on second language acquisition, which will then allow practitioners to develop effective pedagogies for the transmission and revitalization of Indigenous languages. Without this vital research, the current efforts to ensure the transmission of North American Indigenous languages, particularly those that are endangered, will continue to struggle.”

<sup>10</sup> “It will be recognized that the researcher must assume a certain responsibility for the transformations and outcomes of the research project(s) which he or she brings into a community” (Wilson, 2007, p. 195).

to a complete work of 400+ pages. It is now published. It is authored by me, “with Mana Isaac, Ali Gaston, and Mana Samuel,” simply because my Moloko colleagues do not speak English and the academic rules at the time didn’t allow them to be co-authors.<sup>11</sup> Has doing this grammar or any of the other linguistic and language development activities I was involved in had any kind of a lasting effect on the Moloko? I really can’t say.<sup>12</sup> However, I can say that it has had a profound effect on me. I have changed completely from the person who left my home and loved ones to cross the sea to find adventure in another land. I have found another home and more loved ones. I am still a learner. I will never forget.

The Indigenous wholistic framework is informed by Kirkness and Barnhardt’s (1991) 4Rs: *Respect* for Indigenous cultural integrity; *Relevance* to Indigenous perspectives and experiences; *Reciprocal Relationships*; *Responsibility* through participation and the 5<sup>th</sup> R of *Reverence*. (Pidgeon, 2019, p. 420)

## 8 Conclusions

In summary, this paper paints some of the broad strokes about Indigenous thinking and methodologies for research, learning, and teaching I learned from my reading and my experiences and relates them to some of the literature published in these domains. I am still learning. I close with three questions from my reading:

What would it take for Indigenous epistemologies to become policy? (Piper et al., 2019, p. 93)

What does research look like when the inherent intelligence, strength and capacity of Indigenous peoples form the foundations and motivation for intellectual inquiry? (Blair, 2015, p. 820)

To serve Indigenous knowledge systems there must be ethical, epistemological, and methodological inclusion of Indigenous voice, understandings, and practices. Further, there is a need for Indigenous presence within the academy that places value upon Indigenous knowledges, to provide a stewardship role for these knowledges. (Kovach, 2015, p. 50)

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<sup>11</sup> I thank Charlotte Loppie for informing me that this is not the case today.

<sup>12</sup> Some of the literature I read advises people involved in language revitalization not to teach the language or the grammar but to emphasize communication (Franks & Gessner 2013, 57-59, Kipp 2009, McIvor 2012). On the other hand, Cruz & Woodbury (2014, p. 268) argue that grammar is important for advanced learners, for building confidence in teachers, and for pride in the language.



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