OPINION PIECE

T'aats'iigang: Stuffing a jar full

Yahlnaaw / Aaron Grant, University of Northern British Columbia on Lheidli T'enneh territory, Canada

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Jah! X̲aaydaga 'las! Yahlnaaw han.nuu dii kii_G̲a ga. Hl_G̲aagilda X̲aayda Gwaii sda.uu hll iigiing. L̲ax Kxeen sda.uu hll na.uu dii gun. Way.yad.uu 'Nizdeh Nekeyoh Hohudel'eh Baiyoh', Lheidli T'enneh guu.uu hll naa.uu dii ga. T'aawgiiwat han.nuu Naanga kii_G̲a ga. Jaas̲kwaan han.nuu dii aw_G̲a kii_G̲a ga. Bruce han.nuu dii _G̲ng._G̲a kii_G̲a ga. Giidahl_G̲uuhl.aay han.nuu dii daw_G̲anas kii_G̲a ga.

Hey! Wonderful people! My name is Yahlnaaw. I am an Indigenous person from Skidegate, Haida Gwaii. I was born and raised in Prince Rupert on Ts'msyen territory. I am attending post-secondary school at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC) in Prince George, British Columbia, Canada, on Lheidli T'enneh territory. I am a member of the Raven clan and my family has many crests as we are from a Chief's family. My Grandmother's name is T'aawgiiwat, my Mother's name is Jaas̲kwaan, my Father's name is Bruce, and my younger Sister's name is Giidahl_G̲uhl.aay.

Firstly, I find it necessary for you to have a brief introduction to who I am and where I come from. Those unfamiliar with prominent Indigenous academic protocols may have questions revolving around the need for one to situate themselves in their work. Academic work is supposed to be distanced and unbiased—why does it matter who I am? Is it not what I have to tell you that is important?

Opaskwayak Cree author Shawn Wilson (2008) says that situating oneself in one's work is crucial in building relationships with one's readers. But why is this relationship important? Am I not just stuffing you full of information?

I am using my experiences within the Students as Partners (SaP) community to think about these questions—questions of subjectivity and relationships. In the spring of 2018, I had the privilege of being elected a student representative for the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSoTL) with some not-so-gentle pushes to stand for election from my friend and colleague, Dr. Heather Smith (UNBC). ISSoTL was established in 2004 to bring together scholars committed to teaching and learning as scholarly practice in higher education with a clear commitment to engaging with students as partners in recent years. As one of two student representatives on the ISSoTL Board comprised of 17 people, I attended the annual conference in Bergen, Norway in October 2018. I was then submersed (yes, submersed) in what it meant to be a Board Member within such a prestigious organization. I had been told that my voice as an Indigenous person would contribute greatly in

regard to (re)structuring how we view and interpret Indigenous pedagogies within the institution. Unfortunately, these duties slowly grew into not what I was told I would be doing as a member of ISSoTL.

Shortly after my election, Dr. Heather Smith and I, alongside Conan Veitch (UNBC) and Roselynn Verword (University of Victoria), put together a paper and presentation focusing on the power hierarchies embedded within the practice of Students as Partners within the academy. Soon after beginning this research, I began to draw correlations between what other students engaged in SaP experienced and what I was experiencing as a student on the ISSoTL committee. Many students addressed their fear of speaking against an authority figure within the institution and the fear of not having their authentic voice heard due to, for example, a lack of cultural understanding. Many also expressed that the importance they were originally told their voice would have in the project was not as depicted.

I personally believe that SaP, at this point of growth within academia, is often purely tokenistic but fostered by good intentions. Allin (2014) speaks to the complexities of efficiently engaging with students. Allin states, "I critically reflect on the nature of student involvement throughout the project [their research on collaboration occurring in SoTL] and question whether true collaboration between staff and students can ever be achieved due to the power relations that exist within the current higher education system" (p. 95). As I filter through Allin's article, I find that it revolved around the instructor's point of view. There was a complete and total lack of the student voice present in Allin's paper which I found confusing because I thought the premise of Allin's work was to advocate the incorporation of the authentic student voice. I believe that the actual incorporation of the student voice is fundamental in what those involved in SaP are trying to do; however, our messy realities are not always perfect reflections of how we articulate our journeys and practices. I find this observation to be of importance because how can we address this power hierarchy when students are not being represented and engaged in dialogue with instructors in work such as Allin's?

Reflecting on my short experience within the ISSoTL Board, I did not want to speak against those who were not students, and I stepped down as a student representative. I felt that my voice was irrelevant as a student and as an Indigenous person—I was simply there to fulfill the diversity requirement. While I was told by other board members to bring an Indigenous perspective—an Indigenous lens, an Indigenous worldview—to ISSoTL, the dominance of colonial knowledges and pedagogical practices left me feeling I had little room to share my knowledge.

In another ISSoTL interaction, I was invited to collaborate in a session. In the planning process, my approach to research was labelled "alternative" because I do not believe in data collection in the Western tradition. Indigenous knowledges were present long before colonial knowledges; therefore, if anything is to be labelled alternative, it is colonial knowledges because they came after. At first, this left my colleagues with blank stares which soon transitioned into what appeared to be pure shock, realization, and understanding of what I was trying to articulate to them.

My experiences as a student partner in my university, as an ISSoTL student representative, and as an Indigenous person have left me wondering: *How does the taken-for-granted dominance of colonial ways of knowing and being in the ISSoTL community—that*

determine what counts as SoTL and how learners and teachers form relationships—create space for Indigenous people, either students or faculty, to be partners in learning and teaching?

Within the academy, colonial knowledges and teachings promote the preservation of concrete and scientific knowledge. Dr. Kathy Absolon (2011), an Anishinaabekwe scholar from Flying Post First Nation, in her work, *Kaandossiwin: How We Come to Know*, explains that colonial research is often just for the sake of collecting knowledge. Drawing on my experiences to date, I fear that engaging with students as partners in learning and teaching is heading in this direction—stuffing a jar full of knowledge.

I want to engage in partnerships where I can bring myself and be myself. What ISSoTL is missing—and SoTL for that matter—is the fact that we are all humans and our research and knowledge comes from a place that is personal, biased, and full of confounding factors. In a recent discussion with my friend and colleague, Dr. Kelly Matthews (University of Queensland and ISSoTL Board Member from 2016-2019) stated that "it is hard to form relationships or connect with the ISSoTL Board members reliant on monthly online meetings. Within ISSoTL, we are so busy talking about things and doing things that we forget that we are all human beings" (personal communication, August, 13, 2019). Academic work, as mentioned above, is often founded on the premise of objectivity and lack of bias. If we view our research and work as distanced from ourselves and therefore objective, how can we effectively engage in partnerships that are messy and relational?

I always tell people that I am my work because my work would not exist without me. I did not wake up one day and decide on a research topic and carry on to my Master's to fulfill a random topic. My experiences that I brought to the table of my research and work shape who I am and therefore shape my work because they are the same thing. My work is biased and personal—and it is beautiful. As much as you want to believe that your work is objective and free from bias, you need to reconsider your own biases because the experiences that shape who you are directly influence your work. Your work would not exist without you and your experiences.

If we want to engage meaningfully in the growing SaP agenda in higher education, then we need to remember that we are all human and humans crave relationships with those around us. If our work revolves around the divorce of self from our own research, how are we supposed to avoid seeing and working with our students through the same lens you view your research—objective and distanced? I believe that this very process is the foundation of tokenism which is rampant within the Students as Partners work that I have experienced. Power hierarchies are erected, work and research are distanced, and therefore relationships between students and instructors crumble because students become a subject of research— something that is supposed to be objective and distanced—which, as discussed, is impossible research.

Research is not just about stuffing a jar full of knowledge for the sake of keeping it on a shelf in your basement; research is about putting yourself and your relationships into your work because they are your work. SaP and ISSoTL should not be about the simple tokenistic incorporation of students in governance, research, SoTL, or as the topic of research. The relationships you form through partnership practices are what bias your research or SoTL in a positive way. This can only be achieved when we decolonize how we view, conduct, and

interpret research and understand that divorcing yourself from your work and those encompassed within it makes your work impuissant.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

NOTE ON THE REVIEW PROCESS

To honour the subjective and relational commitment of this work, we co-created a dialogic review process that enabled real-time and open conversations about the piece between the editor, reviewer, and author. This is an approach that stretches the typical IJSaP model for reviewing opinion pieces (done within the editorial team with a development stance). Kelly Matthews (as an IJSaP editor) proposed the approach and potential reviewer with Yahlnaaw (author) who preferred it to the traditional model. Dr. Jennifer Fraser was invited to act as an open reviewer given Jennifer's expertise in partnership and critical pedagogies. Through open dialogue, the piece was discussed and refined over a two-week period via email and a collaborative online platform that allowed direct comments and replies on the text. The three of us decided together that it was ready for publication.

NOTE ON CONTRIBUTOR

Yahlnaaw / Aaron Grant *is currently a Master's student studying First Nations Studies at the University of Northern British Columbia on Lheidli T'enneh territory in Canada and holds a Bachelor's Degree in First Nations Studies with a minor in Psychology. Yahlnaaw has been a student partner and researcher in a variety of areas. Yahlnaaw's current research revolves around Indigenous language revitalization through Traditional Storytelling fostered by community collaboration and sharing. Yahlnaaw's language learning journey guided by her Nanaay (Grandmother) has inspired the work that she does.*

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