What Does Being a Settler Ally in Research Mean? A Graduate Students Experience Learning From and Working Within Indigenous Research Paradigms

Kathy Snow

Abstract
Research with Indigenous peoples is fraught with complexity and misunderstandings. The complexity of negotiating historical and current issues as well as the misunderstandings about what the issues really mean for individuals and communities can cause non-Indigenous researchers to shy away from working with Indigenous groups. In conducting research for my doctoral dissertation, I was a novice researcher faced with negotiating two very different sets of social contracts: the Western Canadian university’s and my Indigenous participants’. Through narrative inquiry of my experience, this article explores issues of ethics, institutional expectations, and community relationships. Guided by Kirkness and Barnhardt’s “Four R’s” framework of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility, I aimed to meet the needs of both the groups, but it was not without challenges. What do you do when needs collide? This article shares my process of negotiating the research, the decisions made, and how I came to understand my role in the process as a Settler Ally. It closes with some implications for other researchers who are considering their own roles as Settler Allies.

Keywords
Indigenous research methodologies, qualitative interviews, ethics, settler ally

What Is Already Known?
Battiste (2013), one of the leading scholars in Indigenous education and research, identified conflict between Indigenous research methodologies (alignment of research and worldview) and non-Indigenous methodologies. Wilson (2008) echoed these concerns before identifying a pathway for non-Indigenous researchers to follow to work successfully with Indigenous populations. Bull (2011) outlined formal protocols and procedures of some communities, such as the Nunavut Research Institute (NRI) process, as examples of communities taking ownership and guiding research process. However, these guidelines, though more prevalent now than in the past, still leave much room for interpretation. There are many different ontological positions on how research should be conducted with and for Indigenous communities by non-Indigenous researchers. This article explores this positioning.

What This Paper Adds?
Novice non-Indigenous researchers may question their legitimacy in engaging in research with Indigenous communities because of historical and current issues faced by both non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples in Canada. Novice graduate researchers question their own legitimacy as they learn and grow into researchers. They can face challenging decisions when trying to develop their own ethical positions. This article (a) explores how a settler ally can be defined from a research perspective, (b) examines how research can be approached and conducted in an unbounded Indigenous community—that is, a community that is not defined by geography and that does not have a specific leader/spokesperson, and (c) extends the definition of Kirkness and Barnhardt’s (1991) Four R’s framework to action steps for Settler researchers. The article aims to provide an example of how and why a non-Indigenous researcher...
made decisions about a specific project so that others seeking guidance can learn from the successes and challenges of her particular experience.

Introduction

Indigenous research, be it conducted by Indigenous researchers or by non-Indigenous researchers with Indigenous groups, could be described as going through a renaissance. Historically, research by non-Indigenous researchers was conducted on rather than with Indigenous populations. This occurred without the active involvement of Indigenous co-researchers and with little benefit for the communities or individuals involved (Coburn, 2013; Flicker, et al., 2015; Porsanger, 2004). In particular, in Canada—where the trauma of residential schools and the road to recovery has only just begun—any researcher thinking about working with Indigenous groups in Canada must acknowledge our past and the damage our research has historically done when placed in the hands of colonial thinkers. In the past, many researchers worked from a deficit perspective with the aim of resolving Indigenous problems. This practice endures. Porsanger (2004) describes a typical colonial research relationship as one in which Indigenous people are put under a microscope. Subsequently, many Indigenous communities distrust or are skeptical of Western research approaches and researchers.

I offer a story from my past to illustrate where I position myself and to expose my bias in the work that follows. I lived in Nunavut, Canada, from the time of my birth until I was an early teen. I recall a scientist from the South1 came to study the Nunavut, Canada, from the time of my birth until I was an early teen and to expose my bias in the work that follows. I lived in particular, in Canada—where the trauma of residential schools and the road to recovery has only just begun—any researcher thinking about working with Indigenous groups in Canada must acknowledge our past and the damage our research has historically done when placed in the hands of colonial thinkers. In the past, many researchers worked from a deficit perspective with the aim of resolving Indigenous problems. This practice endures. Porsanger (2004) describes a typical colonial research relationship as one in which Indigenous people are put under a microscope. Subsequently, many Indigenous communities distrust or are skeptical of Western research approaches and researchers.

I offer a story from my past to illustrate where I position myself and to expose my bias in the work that follows. I lived in Nunavut, Canada, from the time of my birth until I was an early teen. I recall a scientist from the South1 came to study the feasibility of growing trees in our community—one which was above the normal habitable area for trees. As I remember it, the researcher presented his plan to the community, but he did not solicit participation beyond hiring someone to watch his tree garden. He planted the trees and found that he soon needed to build a “childproof” fence. Much to the amusement of the community, the children frequently pulled out, stepped on, or found other ways to test the viability of the small conifers. In short, the children ruined his project. I also remember my own parents—both southerners themselves—only half-heartedly admonishing me and the other children because they did not see the purpose of growing trees in our community. They were not alone in their lack of support for the researcher and his project. The town laughed as the children devised clever ways to pull up trees, while the researcher designed more childproof protocols and surveillance systems to protect those trees. The researcher left our community with a lesson in community-based research but perhaps not much else.

In beginning my own doctoral research, I did not want to be like that researcher. The question I faced was one many non-Indigenous researchers ask themselves: How could I conduct research with Indigenous people in a meaningful and respectful way? Was it even my place to do so? I found part of my answer in the challenge presented by Canada’s 2015 Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s2 to Settler and Indigenous Canadians, a call to recognize their responsibility to ensure Indigenous peoples hold their equitable place in Canadian society. I realized from this charge that we all have a role to play. However, the question of how to play that part was much more difficult to negotiate. Alongside the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s report came federal research dollars and an increased interest from all research sectors to engage with Indigenous communities. Indigenous people, groups, and communities were now being put under the microscope more than ever. However, the methodology was different, and presumably, it aimed to find new approaches to relationships between researchers and communities. Or were they? Grounded in my belief that research processes and outcomes can be tools to help us build a more just society, this article offers reflections on how Settler Allies can authentically engage in research that respects different ontologies.

Identifying the Complexity and My Position in It

As mentioned earlier, the negative impact of colonialism is reflected throughout research conducted with Indigenous people (Deloria, 1998; First Nations Centre, 2007; Grande, 2008). In determining a path forward, the three main challenges that I identified at the outset of the work were the legitimization of Indigenous research methodologies developed by and for Indigenous people, concerns around the ability for non-Indigenous researchers to work respectfully in Indigenous communities, and the appropriateness of non-Indigenous researchers’ adoption of Indigenous research methods. At the outset of my project, my well-intentioned, all-White, dedicated dissertation committee consisted of experts in technology, educational communities of learning, and structures of higher education and reform. It did not include a single Indigenous scholar. As a result, a critical perspective and voice was missing. Indigenous academics are in high demand to provide assistance and guidance on research. Indeed, the challenges related to the demands made on Indigenous faculty could be the subject of another article entirely. The solution in establishing my project was 2-fold: to turn to the literature of published scholars from around the world and to transform my Indigenous friends and colleagues into informal advisors.

Arguing for Legitimacy of Indigenous Research Methods

For the past 20 years, a growing collective of Indigenous researchers have been working hard to develop research methodologies that are driven by Indigenous values. In other words, they have been working to decolonize research (Battiste, 2013; Bishop, 2005; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999/2012; Wilson, 2008). Indigenous researchers are leading the way by defining research methodologies from Indigenous epistemologies that better reflect cultural norms of Indigenous peoples and disrupt the balance of power in researcher-participant relationships (Bainbridge, 2015; Bull, 2010; Deloria, 1998). However, the acceptance of Indigenous approaches to research in academia has been slow, and Indigenous scholars often find they must
defend their research approaches in order to gain legitimacy (Coburn, 2013; Deloria, 1998; Witt, 2007). Finding acceptance academically was also a challenge for me. When I presented research approaches that initially aligned deeply with Indigenous research methodologies to my committee, I was directed to refine or change them. I was expected to modify my approach to align with established methodologies. In reflection, many of my committee members’ suggestions were legitimate; I was, after all, a student. Nevertheless, in some cases, I suspect their reserve about my methodologies was related to their fear of the unknown. Some of my approaches were too far removed from the accepted boundaries of “academic research,” and I was not in a position to defend myself: As a non-Indigenous student, I had neither the legitimacy of ancestry nor the experience of polished academics to advocate for my approach. I was not the first to challenge methodological paradigms: The literature exposes established non-Indigenous scholars who faced the same criticisms and conflicts when they attempted to apply Indigenous methods to their own research (Kincheloe & Berry, 2004). At one point, I considered abandoning the project, having grown to believe that the complications were too great to take on as a student.

**Questioning My Own Legitimacy and Intentions**

Because of the historical relationship in Canada between Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups, some researchers might argue that only Indigenous people are able to effectively conduct research with Indigenous people, a view defined by Merton (1972, p. 15) as “extreme insiderism.” I faced some harsh criticism by both non-Indigenous and Indigenous scholars when I began to talk about the seeds of the research with colleagues at the university where I worked. (This was also the location that became the host of the study but was not the university where I studied.) These criticisms might represent the “extreme insiderism” position, but I did not explore the cause of the assessments. Instead, I only considered my own relationship with the comments that were made. What qualified me to speak about Indigenous students’ transition experiences? How could I respectfully adopt an Indigenous methodology? Was it reasonable to do so? I was accused of being a social justice crusader—just another White girl with an agenda of her own, using students to get her degree, and being ridiculous in her attempts to adopt an Indigenous-centered approach to her research. The current literature is rife with debate about the legitimacy of insider versus outsider Indigenous research (Coburn, 2013; Deloria, 1998; Porsanger, 2004; Rigney, 1999; Stover, 2002; Smith, 2004, 1999/2012). Furthermore, regardless of the researcher’s methodological position, there is considerable documentation of issues that arise when non-Indigenous researchers work with Indigenous people. Those documented challenges include misinterpretation (Archibald, 1992), fragmentation of knowledge (Kawagley, 1995), safety and power of relationship (Harrison, 2001; Stover, 2002), and accountability (Champagne, 1998). There seem to be examples of problematic research in every aspect of the process. In Smith’s (2004) critique of Western approaches, he summarizes two of the essential problems of non-Indigenous approaches to research: The absence of tangible community benefit from research as well as the treatment of Indigenous partners as subjects of research. I became quickly aware of the challenges Smith so succinctly reported and that were evident in the literature as a whole. Why would I, as a graduate student of European lineage, consider work in this contested space?

I was asked repeatedly by colleagues, my academic committee, even friends, and family to justify my intentions not only as an academic but as a person. I see now that being asked to consider my own motivation was life changing. So why did I persevere? The answer came from the desire to give back to my community because of my own personal experiences with education in the North. Arguably, my position was reactionary and a direct response to Smith’s aforementioned critique or disempowerment and the “taking” I have personally observed from living and working in community. The best example to explain my position comes from a statement Prime Minister Justin Trudeau made about the gender balance in his newly appointed cabinet. He had written the previously existing imbalance “Because it’s 2015.” In saying this, he was inferring the legitimacy of, and unnecessary debate about, gender equality in present day Canada. That is how I feel about Indigenous worldviews: I should incorporate diverse perspectives in my daily life and work because of where I live. From this position, my research began with observations of graduation rates. I noted that although more Indigenous students were graduating from high school and continuing to postsecondary education, not very many Indigenous students were graduating from college or university (Parkin, 2015; Pidgeon, 2009).

**Negotiating the Space Between Legitimacy and Appropriation Toward a Research Question**

I now had the seed of an idea, cultivated by my past experiences and literature examinations. Remember, I did not want to be the tree researcher from my childhood town, entering a community space with my own agenda. I wanted a collaborative community effort that would be mutually beneficial. So, I turned to a friend and colleague for advice—the director of Indigenous programming at the university where I was working. Long before I was in a position to work on my graduate thesis, the director, who is also an Indigenous leader, talked with me about the ideas, issues, and literature we were reading and experiences that we both had in school. She drove me to work every day, and so these conversations happened in her car. During these discussions, the director got to know both my family and me, and I grew to know the director too. Initially, describing my research process, I did not include the details of our meeting because our conversations were so informal—they were dialogues between friends. However, they were so important to this work and to all the research I have since carried out. The need for authentic and real relationships is foundational to all my research. It was the director who helped me build relationships with the campus community and found the home for
the research. She achieved this by sending me to talk with faculty and staff of the Bachelor of Nursing Transitions Program, identified in this article as the Pre-Nursing Transitions (PNT) Program. The director also set the direction of the research based on her observation of need at the university. The 1-year program was designed to support Indigenous students: It appeared to be following most of the identified best practices evidenced in the current research on transitions and Indigenous student support (Association of Canadian Community Colleges (ACCC), 2010; Anonson, Desjarlais, Nixon, Whiteman, & Bird, 2008; Gregory, Pijl-Zieber, Barsky, & Daniels, 2008; Hardes, 2006; Restoule et al., 2013). Although the PNT Program was at capacity for enrollment, only a few students were successful in moving from that program into nursing. Many students returned to PNT for several years in attempts to negotiate the transition. The director wanted to know why this was happening and what could be done to improve the situation. She sent me to talk to her staff to see what they thought about working with me on a research project and what they would like to see included in the research.

Before determining a research question or methodology, I spoke at length with faculty and staff of the PNT Program about their needs. In the case of this research, defining community was a challenge. Who could speak on behalf of the Indigenous students when they came from many different reserves/communities or when they lived off-reserve and had little grounding in their culture(s)? As the group was not unified, I simply began to ask university administrators, faculty, and staff that question. I also asked them what questions they felt needed to be answered in order to improve the program. The university had easy access to quantitative data, retention rates, attrition, and graduation statistics, but they told me this was not the right information. Faculty and staff identified the need for a more holistic description of student experience. The university had little to no data that included information about the lives and decisions made by the students from whom the quantitative data were drawn. It was evident from these early discussions that the faculty and staff shared my goal of wanting to change the university’s quantitative evaluation of the transitions program into something qualitative—something that honored student persistence and success. Therefore, the research question we developed together was what aspects of the 1-year PNT Program were effective in supporting student persistence, and what, from a student perspective, could be changed to support student success?

**Developing a Methodological Approach**

When you set out to study Indigenous research methodologies, everyone tells you to read Battiste, Kovach, Wilson, and Smith. There are others, but these authors’ names appear most often in the literature. In my reading and according to my bias, I was looking for either an established procedure or a recipe for success. You can find definitive procedures in both quantitative and qualitative research. For example, Yin (2009) and Merriam (1998) outline the exact “how to” details of conducting a case study. However, in reading about various Indigenous methodologies for research, I was faced with something new. Wilson (2008) described research as ceremony and a journey of self-discovery and reflection. Wilson (2008) offered some hope for me, as I considered my own questions about personal legitimacy; he stated that one does not have to be Indigenous to adopt an Indigenous research paradigm, that one does have to shift one’s ontology and practice, focusing on local and contextually derived knowledge rather than on published literature.

As I continued pairing what I was learning from the literature with conversations from knowledgeable people in the community, I began to gain an understanding of both the context of the study and what my methods could be. However, I had to start building my own methodological approach by acknowledging the role Canadian history has had on Settler and Indigenous relationships as well as my own role in the research. The PNT Program coordinator suggested I get to know the students a little before my research by offering them a workshop on research. During the workshop, I could see, hear, and feel some skepticism and mistrust, as I shared ideas about the role of research in university with the students. So, when I later approached them with my own suggestion of a research project, it was tentative and negotiable. Battiste (2013) suggested that, at a minimum, researchers should acknowledge the power dynamic at play when non-Indigenous researchers attempt to work with Indigenous populations. I observed the power dynamic in my work through our negotiations on data collection, data ownership, and what aspects of stories could be shared. I also learned that silence in conversations does not equate to agreement. Looking back, I am thankful that I learned about Indigenous research methods at the formative stage of my research career because it fundamentally changed my perspectives on research in particular and me in general.

In generalized descriptions of Western approaches, the aim of research is objectivity. One way this is achieved is through a separation between researcher and participants. Moreover, there appears in Western approaches to be the belief that the products of research are a commodity that can be owned (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada [CIHR], 2010, Findlay et al., 2015; Saini, 2012). This is not the case with Indigenous research. In the Indigenous approach, the research is a shared story—one that is negotiated at every step and that is mutually beneficial to all involved. It made sense that Indigenous research does not follow a set pattern: After all, the theoretical frame, the methods, and the final product are all to be a result of negotiation in partnership with the community. For guidance on how to collaborate appropriately, I turned to the seminal work of Kirkness and Barnhard (1991), which described the “Four R’s” of Indigenous research: respectful, relevant, reciprocal, and responsible. This is also the framework incorporated into the Canadian Tri-Council Policy Statement for research ethics; however, in that document, the framework has been translated into action items: ownership, control, access, and possession (CIHR, 2010). There are no singular definitions
of Indigenous research that meet the Four R’s because of the complexity of community needs (Coburn, 2013). In a comprehensive analysis of qualitative research methodologies, Métis scholar Lowan-Trudeau (2012) identified the fundamental difference between Western and Indigenous research methodologies as the centrality or acceptance of Indigenous knowledge systems (including spirituality) in the role of all aspects of research, from foregrounding knowledge to data collection and analysis. However, he also identified similarities. Building on the concept of bricolage, Lowan-Trudeau suggested that a new “methodological métissage”—or, mixture of interpretive methodologies—can bridge research processes for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers (Lowan-Trudeau, 2012, p. 116).

**Operationalizing Methodological Bricolage**

In my own approach to methodological bricolage, I investigated the intersection of Indigenous and non-Indigenous research methods for research in my particular context. Narrative study is the methodological approach most often associated with Indigenous research because it allows for the retelling of participants’ stories in their own words and voice, and it builds upon the oral traditions used in traditional knowledge sharing (Barton, 2004; Kovach, 2009; Lowan-Trudeau, 2012). However, considering the potential participants (students in the PNT), the engagement time for them seemed too intensive. I felt I needed a methodology that was less demanding of the participants’ time. In attempts to define the research process from a Western perspective, participatory action research (PAR) has been used by many Settler Ally researchers (Castleden, Consolo, Harper, Martin, & Hart, 2016; Ginn & Kulig, 2015; Ninomiya & Pollock, 2017). Participatory action research engages communities in directing and controlling any or all aspects of the research process. The methodology I finally settled on contained aspects of both narrative study and PAR. However, I did not adopt either in any classical sense.

Instead, I adopted a case study methodology because of the loose structure of the intended community. That is, my community was not regionally defined. Rather, it comprised a collective of people from a variety of different communities, both urban and rural. The community itself was in its formative stages when I met them and was brought together by shared motivation and need. It was composed of students from across the province who had gathered together with the aim of becoming nurses. They had varied backgrounds and experiences. From my initial dialogue about research with the student community, I heard that students were interested in participating for the purpose of informing the university for future program development, but that they did not want to take an active role in the research. Because they were busy, they wanted to participate in a way that was not too time-consuming. Therefore, I adopted an exploratory case study methodology. This allowed for a flexibility of methods and a holistic evaluation that appeared more reflective of the needs of the context and participants (Yin, 2009, p. 28). Support for the selection of a case study methodology was found in the literature: Carjuzaa and Ruff (2010) outlined the importance of highly contextual knowledge gathering that is focused on individual and community growth as key factors to Indigenous ways of knowing. Defining the research in this way also helped me to meet the expectations of my dissertation committee who encouraged a classical approach so that they would be able to evaluate me for the purpose of my receiving a degree. Having successfully negotiated the space between my participants’ needs and institutional expectations, I was now ready for the ethics application.

**Ethics Versus Participants’ Rights**

Approaches to ethics respecting Indigenous research vary across the country. Generally, there are at least three levels of ethics approvals that researchers must obtain: the institutional or university-based ethics procedure; the provincial or territorial approval, which is usually run by Indigenous groups in the relevant region; and the local community or band council. Obtaining ethics can turn into a catch-22, where institutional ethics cannot be granted without local approval, but local ethics cannot be obtained without institutional approval. This scenario arises because if a researcher does not already have a relationship with the community, it is unethical to talk about or solicit research participation through formal conversations without institutional approval. Bull (2011), in what appears to be a process of operationalizing the Four R’s, defined authentic relationship building and collaboration with Indigenous communities as a process of four key parts: consultation, cooperation, communication, and consent. These have been further outlined by the First Nations Information Governance Centre as OCAP®3 principles of ownership, control, access, and possession. The path to ethics approval was made smoother for me because I worked at the institution where I was to conduct the research. As such, I had a relationship with the PNT community as well as the opportunity to consult informally about my research design. However, the institutional ethics application, as with most ethics applications found in Canada, expected a blanket, community-based approval. The PNT Program student community itself was in its formative stages when I met them and was brought together based on motivation and need, with students from across the province gathered together with the aim of becoming nurses, all with varied backgrounds and experiences. This raised a question of ethics: Who had the right to speak for or represent the community? In geographically defined communities, there is often an established group of elders and community leaders who are supported by community members to make decisions on behalf of the community (Arbour & Cook, 2006; Bruner & Bull, 2011). This was not so in my research project. In this case, through negotiation with the ethics board, the university, and the university community, the Director of Programming and the Program Lead both vetted and guided the research
development and provided the letter of approval needed to evidence the consultation and approval process required by the ethics board.

**Relationship Building Through Data Collection**

Both Kovach (2009) and Smith (2004) outlined the importance of following and respecting community-specific protocols for Indigenous research. Furthermore, the critical importance of transparency and benefit to the researcher and the community form the basis of the relationship (Brunger & Bull, 2011). Transparency was critical in the negotiation of the three data collection methods I adopted. From conversations with faculty and staff, I identified two critical, science-based courses in the PNT Program that seemed to act as gateway courses; students who could successfully navigate these two challenging courses were usually successful in their nursing applications, while those who could not be remained in the transitions program, retaking those two courses in particular. These courses were supported by online materials for students who missed classes or needed revisions.

In part because the instructor wanted to know which online supports were used—and how they were used—one of the data collection methods became observing online activities through the use of the reporting system provided by the online learning management system (LMS). The LMS recorded data on the frequency of access and types of items accessed. I also planned to develop field notes related to students’ discussions in the LMS discussion forums. These three aforementioned methods have been documented for use in describing online learning (Alowayer & Badii, 2014; Lock, 2002; Yin, 2009). However, these procedures were minimally useful for this project and may have been detrimental to participation. In early conversations with students who chose to participate in the research, the knowledge that someone was watching made them somewhat uncomfortable. They raised questions about privacy. Could the observers read private messages? How was the information collected going to be used? The participating students also stated that LMS observations had made them hesitant about joining the project, with nonparticipating students citing the same fears about privacy. The discussion forums in the course were not used at all by students. Students cited both a shortage of time and fears about public sharing of questions/privacy as reasons they avoided the forums. For students to feel comfortable to participate in my research, I needed to establish trust by showing them exactly what was observed in the online space as well as demonstrating how it was observed. I also had to share the observations with the participants prior to any broader sharing. The online component of the PNT Program was a small portion of the investigation; however, it helped me to understand the negative impact that quantitative data collection methods can have on a research project whose participants are part of a vulnerable community. It also served as a lesson to me about how much time and trust needs to be invested in the collection of observational data from both a participant and a researcher perspective. In the end, the data from the LMS were only used as conversation points with students during interviews. I showed them the LMS record of participation and asked them what led to participation activities that were observed in the record as a memory trigger to discussion about items of course material they used.

The second data collection tool aimed to gather insights about the nature of relationships within the community and how they changed over time. Using DeLaat, Laly, Lipponon, and Simmons’ (2007) “contact map” tool, students were asked to map out the people within the PNT Program they spoke to daily, weekly, monthly, or infrequently using the contact map a diagrammatic tool consisting of concentric rings. Students were asked to complete the contact map by placing the name of an individual in one of the expanding rings of relationships prior to each of the interviews. Although contact maps resulted in quantified data in the form of a social network map (Borgatti, Everett, & Freeman, 2002), the students adopted the suggested format without hesitation. The contact maps were most frequently (four of six maps) completed either just prior to meeting with me or in discussion with me as a means to open a two-way conversation during interviews. They served as an artifact that we evaluated collaboratively, and they eased some of the initial tensions related to beginning conversations in the project’s early stages. Students shared their individual perspectives on interactions/contacts over a period of time and identified the connections they relied on more frequently and for what purpose. I encouraged them to do this in order to explore the role and impact of relationships within the PNT program, which was designed on the premise that cohorts provided more support and therefore led to greater success.

The final and most critical data collection method was a series of semistructured interviews. In truth, to call them interviews diminishes some of their function because for me the interviews became conversations among friends. While the contact maps served as an ice breaker and opportunity to engage in shared analysis, the interviews became a free space for critiquing the transitions program, sharing frustrations about life as a student, and laughing about solutions and strategies we used to help us cope. The interview protocol consisted of three areas of inquiry: personal experience with the organization of learning and program structure; personal interactions with university and program community; and individual experience and persistence decisions made. The students met with me 3 times during their transition year: at the commencement of the program, just prior to or after midyear exams, and once more at the end of the full-year term. The purpose of these interviews was to discover what was impacting persistence decisions.

Interviews took between 20 and 80 minutes, the length of which was determined by how much needed to be said on a particular day. Although the initial interview followed a conventional researcher/participant dynamic initially, it did not finish this way. Moreover, the subsequent interviews did not follow a direct pattern of question and answer. Put simply, we talked. After all, I was also a student aiming to complete a
challenging program. I shared who I was—a mother, a worker, a student—and the students reciprocated. The students and I shared stories, and we laughed a lot—about the frustrations we had, each other’s past experiences, and funny stories about our learning experiences. We also cried, often for the same reasons. Chilisa (2012) highlighted the critical role of telling stories through relational experiences in Indigenous research investigations. Further, she suggested that relationship building over an extended period of time allows participants the opportunity to share more personal interpretations of events rather than simply offer what they perceive to be appropriate social responses to a given situation. Until I gave of myself, our conversation was stilted. Over the course of the year, students involved in the research would meet me, saying things like, “I’ve been waiting to talk to you all week . . .” Or, they would immediately launch into a story, with the aim of improving transitions at the forefront of our conversations. Sometimes students would arrive at interviews with notes they had taken since the last time we had met, stating, “When this happened I had to write it down so I would not forget to tell you.” They were—and felt like—data collectors and not objects of investigation. They became coinvestigators; they became friends. They were excited about their opportunity to contribute to change. In all of these ways, the relationship building aspect of the research continued and was nourished by the data collection as well as by the subsequent analysis and reporting.

Returning to Participants

Typically, analysis of qualitative data is cyclical, with each interview set instigating coding of transcripts and a search for themes, with the aim of supporting trustworthiness through objective analysis (Merriam, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Saldana, 2013). In my case, each subsequent interview involved participant self-reflection as well as my own self-reflection. At some point—either during each meeting or following the last scheduled research meeting—I asked students to verify my understanding of their stories as well as their own interpretations. For example, I shared the minimal observational data from the LMS with the individuals concerned, asking questions such as, “What was happening here, when you accessed X?” or, “I noticed you never accessed Y. What is it about Y that prevents you from using it?” I did this to gain insight into the factors of the online materials that impacted student persistence. Examining these questions encouraged the students to analyze their own study habits and preferences. Reviewing the contact maps and the subsequent social network diagrams instigated conversations about how students observed their own fit in the university community and what purpose the community served. I also transcribed and coded interviews using the method that Saldana (2013) referred to as in vivo coding, using the participants’ own words for codes. I shared these initial codes with the participants and asked them if my assumptions about possible themes were correct or if I was missing details.

The very nature of qualitative research produces a scholarly concern for establishing the credibility of a researcher’s results. However, credibility becomes even more critical in work conducted with Indigenous participants by a non-Indigenous researcher. Kovach (2009) suggested the use of a mix of Western and Indigenous approaches to analysis. Using a combination of approaches is one way to identify and circumvent biases (Kovach, 2009; Lowan- Trudeau, 2012). However, from an Indigenous perspective, Lowan-Trudeau (2012) stated that trustworthiness is established by the researcher making clear his or her own biases and positioning himself or herself in the work. As with the initial coding, I returned to the students at every subsequent stage, explaining why I developed the themes I did and asking if there was something I was missing or if I had the story wrong. The students were motivated to participate because they wanted their story told. Through the give-and-take between the students and myself throughout the research process, I wanted to ensure that they got what they wanted to reciprocate for the gifts of time and stories they had shared with me.

The Final Report: A Test of Responsibility

I shared and discussed every quote, theme, or paragraph in which a participant’s information was used with that individual participant prior to release. Once each individual indicated they felt comfortable with their story, the composite of all of the stories was also circulated among participants. I wanted them to review it before I sent the final document in its entirety to the examination committee. It was suggested to me that, within the e-mail in which the final thesis was sent to all participants, I add the line, “If you have not sent me a message by [date] I will assume that you agree with the final interpretation and accept that it go forward.” This was in order to encourage participants to respond in a timely manner and to allow me the confidence to submit my thesis to the examination committee. Nonetheless, 2 days after the dissertation was given to the examining committee, one of my participants changed her mind and asked to have all of her data removed.² And so began the scramble to determine how to proceed.

The dissertation review committee already had the dissertation with that participant’s data. I was concerned I would need to immediately call back my thesis and reset my defense date. Selfishly, I wanted to tell the participant what her withdrawal might cost me and my academic career but I did not. It would not have been right to use the relationship I had developed with her to add additional emotional stress or personal pressure. I wanted to engage her in a conversation about why her reasons for withdrawal had nothing to do with me and the research and that she would not be impacted negatively in any way by letting her story stay. However, I could see she was upset, so I did not do that either. After a very sleepless night, some soul searching, and advice from my dissertation supervisor, I simply responded with an acknowledgement of her feelings, a thank-you for her time, an apology if I had led her to feeling angry or upset, and a promise to do what she had asked. Then, I turned to my...
dissertation committee to see what they would do. Falling back on the rules of academia, my examination committee—upon consulting with the university board of ethics and graduate studies procedures—determined that I could still sit my exam as scheduled. They had seen the paper already. They also determined I was probably not legally bound to remove the participant’s data, as the withdrawal deadline I indicated in my e-mail had lapsed. My study met both my university’s and my participants’ universities’ research ethics board ethics review standards. The study met the requirements of the national guidelines (Tri-Council Policy Statement for research involving the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples) used by all institutions in Canada as foundational ethical principals for research, which in turn had been created by the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, as well as by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada in 2010. All participants had been informed both verbally and in writing of their optional involvement in the study, had signed consent forms, and had been informed of their right to withdraw from the study at any time.

It was this last statement—“at any time”—that became the controversial point. What does “at any time” actually mean? Ethics committees now often require a date/time frame to be mentioned for the withdrawal of data, for example, “until results are submitted for publication” or “until results are analyzed, approximately May 2018.” They do this to help clarify the rights and responsibilities for both researchers and participants. It was the view of several members of my committee that in my case the line meant “at any time during data collection only.” However, I did not agree. When I added the statement, I really believed it was important for participants to withdraw at any time. I did not own her story. The data were hers.

Bull (2011) highlighted the critical need for authenticity in research, which meant for me in this case shifting values around ownership. I had grounded my relationship with participants in consensus building and consultation. Although the formal (written) contract had been met, the informal (understood) contract was, in my mind and in the minds of the students I worked with, very different. The understood contract had to be honored first. Brunger and Bull (2011) cited the damage that can be done when research has been disseminated in a public forum before being communicated and approved with the community involved (Cusinato, 1995). Traditional Western research is often focused on the product of the research, with little concern given to either the process or the impact of the process on the lives of the participants (Hoare, Levy, & Robinson, n.d.). However, from an Indigenous perspective, the process is the most important part of the research (Bull, 2011; Porsanger, 2004; Wilson, 2008).

From a Western perspective, I had completed all of the tasks for responsible ethics compliance and I could use the above-mentioned participant’s data in my final article. Laws regarding intellectual property rights most often favor the researcher and, had the project been funded, may have even dictated that the data belonged to the funding agency (Bell & Shier, 2011). However, from a personal perspective, anything other than full removal would have been wrong. The trust and sharing that had developed over the year of conversations would mean nothing if I then claimed the discussion as my own. Once stated in this way, my academic committee also changed their focus. Rather than pondering how to keep the data in, they began considering how to permit me to graduate without it. My responsibility to the community that had invited me in was expressed through an honoring of implied or understood commitments as well as an acknowledgment that the participants’ stories were their own to tell or withhold.

**Reflections and Conclusions**

My research process was far from perfect. My aim was to follow Kirkness and Barnhardt’s (1991) Four R’s—to be respectful, relevant, reciprocal, and responsible—but each observer would analyze and evaluate my effectiveness at achieving that aim differently. History has taught us very well that motivation to help and do right by communities can often cause more harm than good. Following the protocols laid out by university ethics boards to minimize harm is not a true test of authenticity; it is only a beginning. Interpretation of intention in the documentation is the foundation of the treaty debates—one we have still not resolved in Canada. It is just as true and applicable for research. In reflecting on my own learning journey as a researcher, I notice that while I tried to follow the original Four R’s, my practice shows that another Four R’s also emerge from my commitment to do research with Indigenous communities in a meaningful and respectful way: rights, relationships, returning, and reflection. These new Four R’s have become my personal guidelines for becoming a Settler Ally, and I use them regularly to check my intentions and actions in ongoing research.

By rights, I mean starting, continuing, and finishing everything that I do in the protocols and rules of the community members. This means placing community and individual rights above my own research agenda even when that can mean throwing away months of “good” research. This also means protecting the rights of individuals when I am in a position to do so—to be an advocate for community partners and to assist partners in moving their own agendas forward. By removing the story of one participant, the perceived value of the research work decreased from an academic perspective because fewer participants equated to decreased trustworthiness. However, research with Indigenous communities should not be driven by quantitative approaches to supporting academic rigor.

Relationships have made my work possible, credible, and hopefully applicable. The processes and ambitions of the academy do not always encourage authentic research, instead often using quantitative measures, such as number of publications, to gauge effectiveness. This creates a tension for graduate students and early career researchers like myself, as the time needed to develop relationships and trust with communities can be great. All of the trust and relationship building can come to nothing when measured against standard evaluations or
funding limitations. Western guidance to remain objective and distanced from your research participants does not work with Indigenous communities. I have found I need to be present and engage in many different aspects of community life. My ongoing relationship with the research participants is a sign of mutual respect and gives the work credibility.

A big part of that relationship is returning, which includes returning to the individuals involved for continued dialogue at every level, returning the research to the community, and returning to the community for conversation and ongoing relationship building. It does not include disappearing after I get what I need. Academics have tended to “move on”; they engage in partnerships and then move to others; and they change institutions, or leave, when the going gets hard. I am reminded of those southern researchers of my childhood, and it is not the sort of researcher I want to be. Just as communities critically evaluate engaging in a research relationship, I too reflected on the type of research relationship I wanted to enter into. Can it be sustained? I worked with people who will continue to be part of that community, and I consider it a privilege to continue in relationship. The final dissertation as well as all publications—including this one—are shared with the Director of Indigenous Programming for use at the university, and they usually inspire new learning conversations between us.

From the outset of entering the contested space of Settler Ally working with an Indigenous community, I have reflected on my motivations, my process, and my role in shaping and telling the story of the research. This kind of ongoing critical reflection is essential to avoiding some of the pitfalls of our well-meaning predecessors. It is likewise vital to renegotiating and repairing our inevitable shortcomings and errors. Interpreting and applying Kirkness and Barnhardt’s (1991) Four R’s, or my own Four R’s, will look different in different geographic and cultural contexts and will change depending on participants’ and researchers’ resources and goals. As such, all principles regarding research require ongoing attention and careful application. Just as Indigenous researchers are blazing new paths in research institutions, teaching non-Indigenous scholars to recognize and appreciate new ways of gaining and communicating knowledge, so too Settler Allies have their work cut out for them as regards educating scholarly gatekeepers about ways of being effective researchers, even if those methods may not fit established evaluation measures for tenure, promotion, and even publication. As we work toward becoming Settler Allies, we also need to be committed to putting our participants ahead of our own goals, egos, and the institutional parameters that constrain us. We need to argue for change in systemic processes such as ethics approval or funding applications that do not account for consultation and collaborative processes. We need to be willing to sit with the discomfort of accountability—to sometimes contradict community and institutional goals—as do our Indigenous colleagues. We need to stay mindful of the power and privilege at play, as we negotiate our place in the retelling of the stories we are entrusted with. Most importantly, we need to commit to the time, energy, and resources that are required to develop sustaining relationships with the people involved in our research.

Finally, as an Elder advised me, working in this contested space, we need honest mirrors—that is, we need people who can help us in this critical reflection, show us blind spots, check our biases, and keep us grounded. Research participants and community gatekeepers can in some ways act as mirrors, at least to the extent we invite them to join in reflection and provide feedback as well as to the extent that we extend the relationship past the research end. We also need to seek out and invite accountability relationships beyond our immediate research community. Many research institutions are creating spaces for elders, who are one such source. Indigenous colleagues are another.

Consistent with Indigenous research paradigms, we can only go so far in learning to be a Settler Ally by consulting the literature on Indigenous methods and guidelines for working with Indigenous community members. Indigenous community members are our strongest teachers. What they teach extends beyond Indigenous research into better research, overall. Learning to be a Settler Ally has taught me to be a stronger researcher. While Indigenous research methodologies originally seemed introduced as counter to Western research principles, we are learning, through reflection, that the Four R’s—respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility—are effective not only for guiding Indigenous research but also for shaping all research to be responsive to community needs. As such, they contribute to research processes and outcomes that impact community-identified needs.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests
The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Funding
The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

Notes
1. The term South is a colloquialism and used to refer to anyone who comes from a community that is not in Nunavut or the Northwest Territories.
2. The Truth and Reconciliation commission was formed as a national response in Canada to the tragedy and trauma imposed by the residential schools and assimilationist educational policy in Canada which began with the Davin Report of 1879 and (arguably) ended with the closure of the last residential school in 1996.
3. OCAP® is a registered trademark of the First Nations Information Governance Centre (FNIGC). A complete definition of the principles can be found at http://www.FNIGC.ca/OCAP
4. A cohort is a group of students that will enter an educational program at the same time and are scheduled to work together as a group to support one another in a more close-knit relationship.
5. I have been asked many times why the participant withdrew. I do not feel it is my story to share; indeed, sharing the details would contradict everything I aim to explain in this article. I do feel at liberty to explain that her reasons had nothing to do with our.  


relationship. In fact, they had nothing to do with the research. They were personal, and I understand and respect her choice.

References
Alowayer, A., & Badii, A. (2014). Review of monitoring tools for e-learning platforms. *International Journal of Computer Science & Information Technology, 6*, 79–86.
Anonson, J. M., Desjarlais, J., Nixon, J., Whiteman, L., & Bird, A. (2008). Strategies to support recruitment and retention of First Nations youth in baccalaureate nursing programs in Saskatchewan. *Canadian Journal of Transcultural Nursing, 19*, 274–83.
Arbour, L., & Cook, D. (2006). DNA on loan: Issues to consider when carrying out genetic research with aboriginal families and communities. *Community Genetics, 9*, 153–60.
Archibald, J. (Ed.) (1992). *Giving voice to our ancestors*. Vancouver: Herold.
Battiste, B. (2013). *Archibald, J. (Ed.). Giving voice to our ancestors.*
Bell, C., & Shier, C. (2011). Control of information originating from Aboriginal communities: legal and ethical contexts. *Etudes/Inuit/ Studies, 35*, 35–56.
Bull, J. (2010). *Research with aboriginal peoples: Authentic relationships as a precursor to ethical research*. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics, 5*, 13–22.
Bull, J. (2011). Research with aboriginal peoples: Authentic relationships as a precursor to ethical research. *Journal of Empirical Research on Human Research Ethics, 5*, 13–22.
Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada, and Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. (2010, December). *Tri-Council policy statement: Ethical conduct for research involving humans*. Ottawa, Canada: Interagency Secretariat on Research Ethics.
Carjuzaa, J., & Ruff, R. G. (2010). When Western epistemology and an Indigenous worldview meet: Culturally responsive assessment in practice. *Journal of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, 10*, 68–79.
Castleden, H., Cunsolo, A., Harper, S., Martin, D., & Hart, C. (2016). Reconciliation and relationality in water research and management in Canada: Implementing Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies, and methodologies. In Renzetti, S., & Dupont, D. (Eds.). *Water Policy in Canada* (pp. 69–98). Cham: Springer.
Champagne, D. (1998). *American Indian studies I for everyone*. In D. Miheusuah (Ed.). *Natives and Academics: researching and writing about American Indians*. Lincoln: University of Nebraska.
Chilisa, B. (2012). *Indigenous research methodologies*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.
Coburn, E. (2013). Indigenous research as Resistance. *Socialist Studies, 9*, 52–63.
Cusinato, K. (1995). *The voice appropriation controversy in the context of Canadian cultural practices*. Unpublished master’s thesis, University of Windsor. Retrieved from http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/obj/s4/f2/dsk3/ftp04/mq30884.pdf.
DeLaat, M. F., Laly, V., Lipponon, L., & Simons, P. R. J. (2007). Patterns of interaction in a networked learning community: Squaring the circle. *International Journal of Computer-Supported Collaborative Learning*. Retrieved from http://ijcscl.org/_preprints/.../delaat_lally_lipponen_simons_2_1.pdf.
Deloria, V. (1998). Comfortable fictions and the struggle for turf: an essay review of the Invented Indian: cultural fictions and government policy. In D. Miheusuah (Ed.), *Natives and Academics: Research and writing about American Indians* (pp. 65–83): University of Nebraska.
Findlay, I., Lovrod, M., Quinlan, E., Teucher, U., Sayok, A., Bustamante, S., & Domshy, D. (2015). Building critical community engagement through scholarship: Three case studies. *Engaged Scholar Journal, 1*, 33–50.
First Nations Centre. (2007). A critical Analysis of Contemporary First Nations Research and Some Options for First Nations Communities Retrieved from http://www.naho.ca/firstnations/health-a-to-z/research-ethics-sp-new/.
Flicker, S., O’Campo, P., Monchalin, R., Worthingdon, C., Masching, R., Guta, A., & . . . Thomas, C. (2015). Research done in “a good way”: The importance of Indigenous elder involvement in HIV community-based research. *American Journal of Public Health, 105*, 1149–1154.
Ginn, C., & Kulig, J. (2015). Participator action research with a group of urban first nations grandmothers: Decreasing inequities through health promotion. *The International Indigenous Policy Journal, 6*, 1–16.
Grande, S. (2008). Response to chapter 4. In J. Cammarota & M. Fine (Eds.), *Revolutionizing education: Youth participatory action research in motion* (pp. 84–88). New York, NY: Routledge.
Gregory, D., Pijl-Zieber, E. M., Barsky, J., & Daniels, M. (2008). Aboriginal nursing education in Canada: An update. *The Canadian Nurse, 104*, 24–8.
Harrad, J. (2006). Retention of Aboriginal students in postsecondary education. *Alberta Counselor, 29*, 28–33.
Harrison, B. (2001). Collaborative programs in Indigenous communities from fieldwork to practice. Lanham, MD: Altamria Press.
Hoare, T., Levy, C., & Robinson, M. (nd). Participatory action research in native communities: Cultural opportunities and legal implications. Retrieved from http://www3.brandonu.ca/cjns/13.1/hoare.pdf.

Kawagley, O. (1995). A Yupiaq Worldview: A pathway to ecology and spirit. New York, NY: Waveland Press.

Kincheloe, J., & Berry, K. (2004). Rigour and complexity in educational research: Conceptualizing bricolage. London, England: Open University.

Kirkness, V. J., & Barnhardt, R. (1991). First Nations and higher education: The four R’s—respect, relevance, reciprocity, responsibility. In R. Hayoe & J. Pan (Eds.), Knowledge across cultures: A contribution to dialogue among civilizations. Hong Kong: Comparative Education Research Centre, The University of Hong Kong. Retrieved from http://www/ankn.uaf.edu/IEW/winhec/FourRs2ndEd.html.

Kovach, M. (2009). Indigenous methodologies: Characteristics, conversations, and contexts. Toronto, Canada: University of Toronto Press.

Lock, J.V. (2002). Laying the groundwork for the development of learning communities within online courses. Quarterly Review of Distance Education, 3, 395–408.

Lowan-Trudeau, G. (2012). Methodological métissage: An interpretive Indigenous approach to environmental education research. Canadian Journal of Environmental Education, 17, 113–30.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). Case study research in education: A qualitative approach. San Francisco, CA: Jossey Bass.

Merton, R. (1972). Insiders and outsiders: A chapter in the sociology of knowledge. American Journal of Sociology, 78, 9–47.

Miles, M., & Huberman, M. (1994). Qualitative data analysis: An expanded sourcebook (2nd ed.). London, England: Sage.

Morton Ninomiya, M. E., & Pollock, N. (2017). Reconciling community-based Indigenous research and academic practices: Knowing principles is not always enough. Social Science & Medicine, 172, 28–36. doi:10.1016/j.socscimed.2016.11.007

Parkin, A. (2015, June). International report card on public education. Toronto, Canada: Environics Institute. Retrieved from http://environicsinstitute.org/uploads/institute-projects/environics%20institute%20%20parkin%20%20international%20report%20on%20education%20%20final%20report.pdf.

Pidgeon, M. (2009). Pushing against the margins: Indigenous theorizing of “success” and retention in higher education. Journal of College Student Retention, 10, 339–60. doi:10.2190/cs.10.3.e

Porsanger, J. (2004). An essay about Indigenous methodology. Nordlit, 15 (Special Issue on Northern Minorities), 105–120. Retrieved from http://septentrio.uit.no/index.php/nordlit/article/view/1910.

Restoule, J., Mashford-Pringle, A., Chacaby, M., Smillie, C., Brunette, C., & Russel, G. (2013). Supporting successful transitions to post-secondary education for Indigenous students: Lessons from an institutional ethnography in Ontario, Canada. International Indigenous Policy Journal, 4: 1–10.

Rigney, L. (1999). Internationalization of an Indigenous anticolonial cultural critique of research methodologies. Wicazo Sa Review, 14, 109–21.

Saini, M. (2012). A systemic review of western and aboriginal research designs. National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health. Retrieved from https://www.academia.edu/18550939/A_systematic_review_of_Western_and_Aboriginal_research_designs.

Saldana, J. (2013). The coding manual for qualitative researchers (2nd ed.). London, England: Sage.

Smith, L.T. (2004). Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples. London, England: Zed Books.

Smith, L.T. (1999, 2012). Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples (2nd ed.). London, England: Zed Books.

Stover, Dale (2002). Postcolonial sun dancing at Wapamni lake. In G. Harvey (Ed.), Readings in Indigenous religions (pp. 173–19). London, England: Continuum.

Wilson, S. (2008). Research is ceremony. Winnipeg, Canada: Fernwood.

Witt, N. (2007). What if Indigenous knowledge contradicts accepted scientific findings? The hidden agenda: Respect, caring and passion towards aboriginal research in the context of applying western academic rules. Educational Research in Review, 2, 225–35.

Yin, R. (2009). Case study research: Design and methods (4nd ed.). London, England: Sage.