

# Cultural Solutions 201 Evaluation Learning to Fly

February 23-25<sup>th</sup>, 2022



## Introduction

Cultural Solutions Training 201- Learning to Fly was offered to 15 participants over the course of February 23-25<sup>th</sup>, 2022. To begin the hard work of Reconciliation in both programming and systems areas, facilitators shared traditional stories and teachings, meant to deepen understanding and personal experience of ceremony and parallel process, to be used in the delivery of human services with Indigenous service users. Sessions were facilitated by three Elders and two Knowledge keepers who delivered both oral and written training materials that together, explored concepts, and relevant service theories typically used in a First Nations and Métis contexts. This evaluation is being prepared for two reasons:

- accountability back to the funder of this session
- for continuous improvements for future sessions

Indigenous academics have started to pave important roads, shepherding in new ideologies, practices, and parallel methods such as “wisdom seeking”, replacing western normed research and re-aligning the practice of co-created “research” as a positive and natural community process.<sup>1</sup> According to Lindstrom et al,<sup>2</sup>

*.....the foundational assertion that fuels Indigenous research is that western practices have been weaponized against Indigenous peoples, has taken place without the consent of Indigenous peoples, has advanced Western society's agenda and propelled Western academics' personal advancement without direct benefits to Indigenous communities, has defined problems according to Western interpretations and has served to perpetuate stereotypes and colonial policies based on exclusive Western understandings of Indigenous cultures.*

Indigenous research in contrast is active, centering Indigenous voices, issues, and historical antecedents in ways that are aimed at offering discernable benefits to

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<sup>1</sup> Cavino, 2013; Moreton-Robinson, 2017; Lightfoot, 2017; Tall Bear, 2017

<sup>2</sup> Lindstrom et al, 2020

Indigenous people and communities. Co-created evaluative practices that define problems or community knowledge gaps with a focus on the desires of community can also re-frame research to better serve community interests. As described by Tuck, desire-based methodologies embrace the messy and multi-layered future-state desires of communities.<sup>3</sup> They also apply a more holistic lens, exposing the multidimensional destruction of colonial process as experienced by communities in ways that have not been visible before.

*.... desire-based frameworks are concerned with understanding complexity, contradiction, and the self-determination of lived lives. ....Such an axiology is intent on de-pathologizing the experiences of dispossessed and disenfranchised communities so that people are more than broken and conquered. This is to say that even when communities are broken and conquered, they are so much more than that—so much more that this incomplete story is an act of aggression.*

### **Capturing the Story Through an Indigenous Lens - Oral Process**

Approached from this “eyes-wide-open” perspective, Indigenous research conducted in ethical, multi-dimensional, desire based, and holistic spaces can generate new information which can be both self-determining and empowering for participants and agencies alike. Supported from within, Indigenous research can help re-build community identity, pride, and Nation sovereignty.

Indigenous Elders are challenging systems to bring back appropriate oral methods such as circle process and ceremony for community discussions including active, co-created research. Oral process’ such as storytelling can uncover hidden truths that are important to communities<sup>4</sup> and positions evaluator in essential roles as allied co-investigators, with a mandate to advance community healing. In addition to the stories themselves, principles of Natural law are embodied within Indigenous

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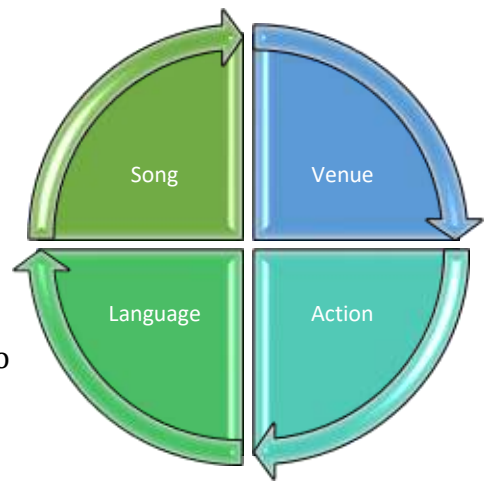
<sup>3</sup> Tuck, 2009

<sup>4</sup> Lightfoot, 2017

stories adding to the richness of the data being received. According to Pikani Elder/ Dr. Reg Crowshoe when operating from within an oral tradition research become iterative, complex, and continually fluid based upon the filtration of good and bad information from participants, and their environments as they tell their stories<sup>5</sup>. This necessitates a fluid evaluation that can shift with the ebbs and flows of the participants as more information is revealed.

### **Elders Ethics Circle Process**

Venue, Action, Language, and Song (VALS) is an Indigenous evaluation methodology articulated by Pikani Elder, Dr. Reg Crowshoe as a holistic way of validating oral story telling as *real*, with an emphasis on translation and paralleling stories into participant focused contexts. This method was used to capture participant stories. The VALS framework is operationalized as follows:



#### **Venue – Gathering in the Circle**

Venue as a noun is the place where everyone gathers for a common purpose. Oral cultural protocols or rules are paralleled to specific gathering places. Venue is also a verb – actioning ethical and safe spaces to share thoughts, observation, and stories through in-person and face-to-face interaction.

#### **Action – Oral Truthing Ceremony**

Action is both a noun and a verb and is the physical demonstration of the evaluator, charged with generating findings that are not only helpful but offer a new truth to move the governance project forward.

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<sup>5</sup> Crowshoe, 2020

## **Language – Storytelling**

Language may be verbal or nonverbal, with the venue determining what type of language will be used. Listening to participant stories were guided by the respectful practices.

## **Song – Final Truthing Ceremony “Graduation” in a Cultural Context**

Song is the final achievement given to the participants. This is included as part of the Oral Truthing Ceremony and is intended to support participants on their continued journey by acknowledging the strengths of their commitment. In the Indigenous context, receiving a Song endows that person with cultural rights, privileges, and responsibilities that returns them back to the Pipe and ceremony, time and again.

To close the circle we asked participants to think about 3 Indigenous indicators. The questions demonstrate not only knowledge and learning, but an application of the knowledge and a commitment back to continuous growth. Upon the request of the Elder the information orally shared and transcribed was smudged twice – once in the circle and once before recording. This is an important step in oral validation and as such the theming and comments below can be considered validated through the process of ceremony. The following questions were asked:

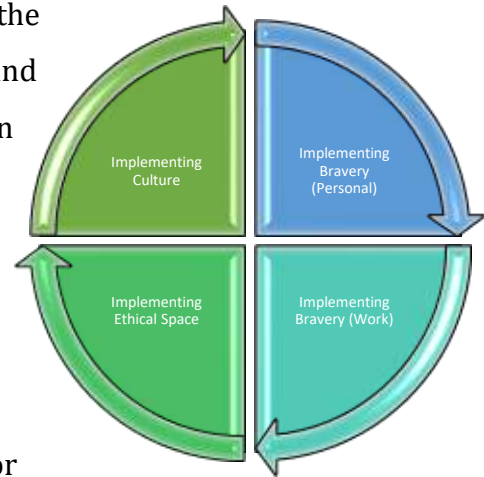
- What did you hear?
- How will you use what you heard?
- How will you support the building of relationships in the future?

All quotes were pulled from the audio transcript then themed into the most common areas of learning. In most cases an Elders teaching opens each section.

All my relations.

## Themes

Intentionality towards epistemological change was the most common theme, with several sub-themes around entering brave spaces. The term safe space has been used in various contexts in higher education—from movement-building to academic theory, to student support services, as well as in the classroom. Although the origin of the term remains unclear, its many uses have ultimately centered on increasing the safety and visibility of marginalized or oppressed community members. The term *brave space* draws attention to the differences and to bring clarity to the conversation. First popularized by Brian Arao and Kristi Clemens a brave space contains five main elements:



- Controversy with civility - where varying opinions are accepted
- Owning intentions and impacts - where people acknowledge and discuss instances where a dialogue has affected the emotional well-being of another person
- Challenge by choice - where people have an option to step in and out of challenging conversations
- Respect - where people show respect for one another's basic personhood and finally
- No attacks - where people agree not to intentionally inflict harm on one another

*Intentionality* infers being deliberate or purposive and was a common theme in all aspects of participant learning. Intentional decolonialization and challenging of the settler state is rooted in acknowledging the harm and legacies of white supremacy and creating new ways of knowing and understanding—moving away from theories of whiteness to those more aligned with Indigenous ways of knowing. In this respect

the participants are “barking up the right trees” as expressed by the Elder will be discussed further in the 4 themes below that speak to *implementation with intent*.

### **Theme #1: Implementing Cultural Intentionality in Western Spaces**

*This is so much different than just listening to cultural awareness. And I heard all of you talk about pieces of setting that playing field, which is good. I just want to maybe move ahead here. I just want to say that all of you. I'm always honored to share these words and share time with you. And I'm sure we'll get to meet again at times. I'm always anxious to meet anybody that we had a chat with, and we all must depend on each other to survive. But it's been an honor I have I've had I had expectations at the beginning by saying if you can view from an Indigenous perspective, and certainly the discussion today that I'm hearing now is there is we are seeing some light coming from both perspectives to, to start understanding each other. And those are far exceeded what I expected from working with you today. And I'm so happy for that – Elders comments.*

### **Participant Comments:**

- *I still have a far way to go when looking at parallels and funders and reports and things like that, but I think we're on or I think I'm on the right track on protecting the smudge with our Elders and really being that bird that flies out to protect and feed us little ones, right and about learning how to be humble and to sit back and take the time to listen. And watch. Just to take that time to step back. So I'm so appreciative of your time, your knowledge.*
- *So very illuminating, taking what we learned this morning from Elder Reg. And I think, for me, the biggest thing, because I work in such a quintessential bureaucracy, that it's like, about unpacking how everything is run, how we do work at the city, and like with this project, really kind of being a change agent.*
- *And so one of the things was just that, you know, having the teachings in place and ensuring, you know, those protocols are known. And I mean, like, I think it comes down to patience and time, and just, you know, being open to that*

*understanding and open to learning and ensuring that, yeah, we're doing those teachings.*

- *Think about all the different stakeholders, think about what they need to feel comfortable, and feel protected. Leaders, Elders, even community members, like those with lived experiences, just bringing that intention every time we meet and discuss. And that's just not how we do things at the city. Unfortunately, it's very, very hierarchical. It's very, very top down.*
- *It's being sensitive to that those intergenerational traumas, the blood memories, all those things, and really respecting the knowledge of that person and who they are in bringing that out through our program offerings but making sure that they have the sovereignty to do that, that we give them. That power, we're not in a power position, like that position of power. We're all equalized up together and humility in this in this path. So really, it's that reciprocity piece, and finding the language in the discussion and creating that safe space to talk about those things in a real in a deepening way.*
- *Your organization really being structured on you know, culture as its foundation and all those practices. And so it really is embedded in the way from people who are delivering programs up to the board. So that is there's protection in there. And I think the other thing that really coming from coming from outside your organization, what I feel like is because I've been able to be part of the community of practice with someone like Kirby, who leads your organization with a willingness to share in this community practice. From all of us about what we're learning and doing, I mean, that becomes a place to consolidate how a different way of Indigenous evaluation approach how the rest of us could use and learn from that.*

## **Theme #2: Implementing Ethical Space in Western Spaces**

*I think we're all looking; we're all barking up the right tree. And I think when we look at the Indigenous community, we are a communal society. And we must survive together. And not only human, communal, but it's the whole environment that you live*



*with. That's part of your survival. And I heard that part of the discussions, I think, those are challenges just like today, we look at legislated laws, and it really protects individual perspectives, rather than the collective perspective of the Indigenous people. And those are, those are some of our values, principles, and values that that we hold. But I think if we keep moving to ethical space, and concept of understanding each other through the principles or practice, we can start addressing these concepts of communal survival and individual survival, though we need to get to those discussions, but we need to set the playing field – Elders comments.*

**Participant Comments:**

- *Particularly that focus on the ethical space and how we make sure that we are being not only inclusive but making sure that we are creating a space where everyone has a voice and that the voice of our indigenous leaders and Elders, not only as equal, but like comes forward in a really good way, just really sits with me and I take that responsibility seriously and thinking about how I need to move forward differently as I go forward from here.*
- *We need to really spend the time and bring people along and create that equitable, full space, and having leadership and technical people speaking together alongside community and have everyone do the work, not just the people on the ground.*
- *Inviting space and ethical practice and protecting of our Elders and protocols, and really trying to create a framework that is open and inclusive to all. And we even went as far as the discussion on it's not just policy and procedures, it goes much further up the ladder into accreditation expectations to be funded.*
- *I think, to a big learning from me, we're doing this work with Indigenous people, communities, and stakeholders. So we need to find ways to integrate Indigenous practice, like smudge, like a talking stick, and to set the intention in the tone of each meeting that we have with our leaders and the community.*
- *A new takeaway for me is we need to be in those teachings ourselves, for ourselves, and that, that really resonated with me and, and creating. So it's*

*new, new ways of speaking. So creating an ethical space, not just a safe space, but a safe ethical space.*

- *But it's creating space; equitable space now. I have some hope. It's doable, because of our discussion this morning.*
- *So we started with kind of sharing some of the challenges we face within our own organizations. Um, one of the big topics was the ethical space. And just the challenge of, you know, it can't be a one-person job. So even if I'm understanding of it, how do I put it throughout all the programs and ensure that, you know, all the programs are understanding this, this concept and able to create an ethical space to welcome Elders and have those proper practices in place.*

### **Theme #3: Implementing Bravery in Western Spaces**

*I just want to pick up on your comment of need to be brave. Okay, can imagine if we go back to the 70s and we're working with Western organization at that time, you needed to be extra brave, to start working with Indigenous communities. There were many restrictions back then. But we move ahead to today. We have Elders that are because of time, we're losing Elders, they're coming out and saying, we want to help. Elders are coming out and saying, we want to share our knowledge. Because if we don't, our young people are going to be in a bad place. So we have that opportunity now. And I think we need to be brave to work with those Elders. And they, you know, they, there's a few things who may go wrong, but I think as we keep going, being brave, we're going to eventually get to the right space. So right now I see the opportunity with Elders. And I think that's an important time – Elders comment.*

#### **Participant Comments:**

- *I feel like I'm at this critical juncture, where it's like, be brave. Or get off the pot. I'm not to put too much pressure on myself. But that's kind of how I'm feeling. It's like, how do I navigate through this current hurdle I have in front of me, it's*

- like, I think the answer is to be brave and to be bold, but you know, be respectful.*
- *My heart is filled with gratitude. I have new ideas to bring back to the organization and using my voice and the power of humbleness as well. And I'm excited really, excited.*
  - *If we don't really understand each other, then really its only people sitting in a room together. So thank you to all of you. Just wonderful. I'm having a hard time leaving the nest. It feels safe.*
  - *Cynthia, when you talked about bravery like that really resonated with me. I really value learning and I tend to like to observe and listen more than speak. And so I think, for me, I'm at that place now where I need to be brave and start acting and sharing, you know, the great teachings that I've been privileged enough to receive. I know it's a slow process, but I mean, we can take all the time in the world, but if we don't act, nothing's ever gonna change. And so I think just taking that knowledge that I loved when he said, Be wise and try hard like that, it's like, exactly right, like and I tried to reach wisdom by listening, but we must act, we must start trying and so yeah, I leave today with a commitment to really start being brave and being loud and making sure that people listen.*
  - *And funding is a problem, but I think we can just totally put it in cultural resource funding. We need to be creative on how we can include in the in organizational visions and missions, the Indigenous component and then it goes throughout the whole organization. And being creative with funding resources can be shared by everybody too. And then we don't drain cultural resource dollars so fast, but also the discussion like to be brave.*
  - *We love going to ceremony because we're accepted. We're a part of, it's just, it's innate. Like, we know that we understand that. And then we come into the Western worldview, where it's top down, and everything trickles down and things like that. And we forget that we're Indigenous, and that we do have a voice and that it does matter. And sometimes that's the scary part is saying that*

- because suddenly, you go into this whole headspace of oh my gosh, I'm stirring the pot. What happens if I get fired? Because I'm saying something? Where's my backing? Who's gonna back me? When I say something, and it always comes up with the Elders, it always comes up with the ancestors are always there with me, my creators always there with me to help me. And I know that if I must move on, then there's a reason why that I must move on and that it's okay.*
- *Prior to I was feeling very stuck. I was also stuck feeling you know, like feelings of anger, frustration, but a loss of hope. I feel like today was a real moment like I feel like there's a path forward. I'm really inspired and committed. Recognizing it is a slow process. Recognizing a need to have patience. and understanding and seeing my part in this and how I ended up angry frustrated and feeling alone. I need to be brave that I need to stand in a place of more confidence when I'm working with my organization and that you know, I have been privileged with this information being a little bird and being in this nest and that I do know something that I can bring back to the organization*

#### **Theme #4: Implementing Personal Bravery (Change)**

*My father, he passed on when he was 100. And when he was at home, I sat with him. And, you know, comfort him in these last days, He said I missed the days when our medicine men were so powerful that in their ceremonies, they perform magic and miracles. He said I miss those days. I don't see them anymore. I don't see the drumming. I don't see the smudge. I don't see the circle. I don't see the rocks and the water and fire and do people that are healers. I don't see them anymore. Those medicine people back then were powerful. What is power? And he said, knowledge, the knowledge that they had. And their knowledge that they accepted was their power. So they sat in circles and listened to knowledge. And the knowledge they maintained is what gave them power. He said, I can have a lot of knowledge that makes me powerful. However, when I'm talking with people, or an individual, the minute or the second they understand that's what magic is. Because then we all understand. Just with this course and listening to all of you, I could see what he means by power. I can see what he means by magic. Because what we've talked about a new far exceeded some of our*

*goals, but also, you're going to be given to go out and talk about the concepts of these frameworks. And the more that can understand you are performing magic. So that's what I always understand the old man, we're still we still have it. But if we don't use it, we're going to lose it one of these days – Elders comment.*

### **Participant Comments:**

- *I feel so honored and privileged to know you that way. And just know that I've been sitting at your feet for a long time. And that's a beautiful place to be. I know whenever we enter a circle, we never leave the circle the same. And I can absolutely say without a doubt, I'm not the same person being with you for three days. And it's that idea of just deepening, right? And that understanding of Indigenous transformation, and how we learn and how we do things.*
- *I was bringing up was, the Indigenous pedagogy. So there's that reciprocity and paying it forward in that that loving community. So in that process, just deepening into those questions, that's all it was about deepening in the questions for ourselves and deepening into the questions for the families and learning to observe ourselves in the way that we learn ....how we learn through these processes.*
- *I just learned about myself through this, and the next place, my mind kind of goes, this is a real sovereign thing that's happening here. And there's real responsibilities that are here, and obligations, that duty sort of thing that is happening here. And so with that, with these teachings, that a treasure in the way that it's affecting us, because you can see the effect it had as we came into the circle, and the things that we were struggling with. It's really helped us to grow and learn and it just doesn't stop in our minds. You know, it becomes kind of embodied. It's an embodied practice. It's an embodied way of being, it's that indigenous transformation of who we want to become.*
- *I feel reenergized. And I remember one of the first teachings I learned from you. Reggie was in a teepee. And there was a lot of people in that teepee. And you looked at the door and you asked people to sit aside leave that door open so*

*that our ancestors can come in. And ever since then, I always look for that and I chuckled to myself. I find myself not just doing but being and I don't even know... I have so much to learn and I'm just so grateful for where I'm at and grateful for all of you and now we are all connected, and we have each other's emails, and we can reach out and I just I value that so much and we're not alone.*

- *I think I do feel like there's an intention, but I don't know It's always been as effective as what it could be. And I feel like that's a responsibility that I have with either my place in a circle or my position in an organization. And it's a responsibility and I feel like I'm only wanting to fully embrace in, in finding the tangibles. And I still feel like I don't fully know all of what those tangibles are, but I think I have a better understanding that that's what my task is right? Now that that's what I must try hard at.*

### **Closing remarks.....**

Working intentionally in brave spaces requires a challenge to pervasively normed white patriarchal discourse. Often hidden, this norm recursively fuels the systems and structures that reinforce “whiteness”. For real change to occur the Little-Birds must come together to unpack whiteness, challenge its structures and develop new ways to move forward. Through the transfer of the song, graduates have the foundational knowledge to begin this journey. We wish them well

All my relations