**Bridging cultures over-under: Enabling success from the heart**

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**Abstract**

With the increasing demographic of Indigenous students, both in Canada and Australia as well as globally, preparing for university through enabling programs, it is critical to create strong bridges to university that enable success in the Eurocentric-Western system by connecting with and valuing Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Learning. As educators teaching in enabling programs on polar opposite sides of the world, Canada and Australia, our research has led to the emergence of unique friendships, knowledge-sharing, and co-learning between students and educators in the First Nations’ Transition Program at the University of Lethbridge, in Lethbridge, Alberta and the Preparation for Tertiary Success program at Batchelor Institute in Darwin, Northern Territory. Collaborative learning between students and ourselves as educators was actualised through classroom WebEx sessions where students virtually shared their stories and experiences, academic works and culture over a meal. Further collaborative engagement and learning continued and continues through a closed Facebook group. In this paper we present four key features of our enabling programs that students feel is critical to their success: those of relationships, cultural safety, collaborative learning and adequate time. Through this project and continued collaboration, as educators we have learned much about our own scholarship of teaching and learning and how it is impacting us moving forward. We share our thoughts. Our project, *Bridging cultures over-under: Enabling success from the heart*, celebrates the spirit of learning in two worlds achieved through the pedagogy and practice of Two-Eyed Seeing and Both-Ways.

**Introduction**

It is disturbing to note that the Indigenous experience and current socioeconomic plight in Canada and Australia, countries on polar opposite sides of the equator, is sadly a parallel story of cultural genocide. The impact of the historical attempted assimilation of the Indigenous peoples into the dominant non-Indigenous settler population and the erasure of Indigenous identity through Residential Schools in Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015) and the Stolen Generation in Australia (Attwood, 2008) has resulted in a population of people who have been failed by the dominant Eurocentric-based education system. The educational challenges of engagement, retention and poor graduation rates are similar in both countries and thus a key underlying root to the socioeconomic disparity that exists between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Since the apologies of the Australian Prime Minister Kevin Rudd (Rudd, 2008) and the Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper (Harper, 2008) to their respective Indigenous peoples in 2008, both countries have come to realize that the way to address the socioeconomic disparity is through the very mechanism that caused the issue in the first place, that of education. The question is how? While there has been increasing focus on the K-12 system in the past decade specifically, it still remains that many Indigenous students leave before completing secondary school for a myriad of reasons, one of the key being the lack of cultural relevancy in both the teaching methodologies as well as the curriculum (Brayboy & Maaka, 2015; Hogue, 2018; Wilkins, 2017). Increasingly however, we see leavers returning as mature students, after being away from study for many years, with a greater, more focused desire to complete a post-secondary degree. They want to have an equitable voice and place moving forward in the 21st century.

Transitioning to university, in itself poses challenges for many students, but it poses greater challenges for Indigenous students: who often do not meet the entrance requirements; who are often the first in their family to pursue post-secondary education and thus do not have role models or mentors; who may have to move away from community to large unfamiliar centres to do so; and who are often older with many responsibilities seldom seen among the newly graduated non-Indigenous students. Additionally, most do not understand how to navigate the entrenched paradigm of university. Enabling programs, also known as bridging programs (Fredericks et al, 2018) such as the First Nations’ Transition Program (FNTP) at the University of Lethbridge in Lethbridge (UofL), Alberta, Canada and the Preparation for Tertiary Success (PTS) program located at Charles Darwin University’s (CDU) Casuarina campus, delivered in partnership with Batchelor Institute of Indigenous Tertiary Education (BIITE) in the Northern Territory of Australia, are exemplars of successful key pathways intended to provide a solid foundation for Indigenous students wishing to enter into tertiary education.

The University of Lethbridge is uniquely located within the heart of Blackfoot territory, next to the largest reserve in Western Canada. While the FNTP accepts students from a wide demographic across the Western provinces, the target group and largest draw are from the three surrounding Blackfoot reserves; Piikani, Kainai, and Siksika, as well as those who live off reserve, either in or near the city of Lethbridge. Since its inception, the goal of the program is to provide those Indigenous students who are otherwise inadmissible an opportunity to enter into and succeed at university by providing a solid foundation of core skills in a supportive cohort environment that attends to Indigenous ways of knowing and learning (IWKL) with the principle of bridging cultures (Aikenhead, 1998, 2001) through a “Two-Eyed Seeing” (TES) (Bartlett, Marshall & Marshall, 2012) approach. Two-eyed seeing, a philosophy established by elders Albert and the late Murdena Mashall, and Dr. Cheryl Barlett, refers to seeing with one eye through an Indigenous lens, and the other through a Western lens, using both together for true depth, holistic and informed perception. Outcomes of the 2014 Academic Quality Assurance Review (Hogue et al., 2014) of the FNTP since its inception, indicated that Indigenous students who completed the FNTP were retained to graduation at a 10% higher rate than any student (Indigenous or non-Indigenous) who entered the university in the traditional mainstream way. These statistics were foundational to supporting the redesign for permanency of the program, originally on interim funding, at the UofL, and it has become a model for other cohort programs. The students now take a core set of courses together in the first semester and a smaller core plus electives of selected choice in the second semester, with the support of the program to help them feather into mainstream university.

The Preparation for Tertiary Success (PTS) program designed and delivered by Batchelor Institute of Tertiary Education (BIITE) in the Northern Territory of Australia, in partnership with CDU, is also an Indigenous enabling program that has been the subject of redesign. As with the FNTP, the goal is to increase the successful completion of the program and transition to university for Indigenous learners who might not otherwise qualify to enter university, or who need or wish to have the extra first year support. It draws Indigenous students largely from remote communities but also from within the areas surrounding Darwin and Alice Springs, where their program branches are located, as well as Indigenous students from other parts of Australia. ‘Both-Ways’ (BW) informs the work done at BIITE and according to Ober and Bat (2007), is a state of mind as much as it is a philosophy of education, functioning as the framework in all things, at all levels. Ober and Bat critically identify that in BW it is about who we are as educators as much as it is about what we know. They frame the BW philosophy as a continuous question about how to bring both knowledge systems together. The objective of both programs is to support the learning journey of Indigenous students to develop skills necessary for Eurocentric-based university success. These include, but are not confined to, effective academic writing skills, information literacy, improved numeracy, science skills, social science skills, computer skills and humanities/fine arts perspectives, in a culturally relevant and supportive environment. Underpinning both programs, is a resilience framework which is supported by the TES or BW approach.

In 2016, funded by a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council Insight Development Grant (SSHRC-IDG), Michelle, an associate professor and Coordinator of the FNTP and Joanne Forrest, a lecturer in the PTS program, met on Michelle’s scoping research trip to Australia. The focus of the trip was to address the question: *What enables successful transition to and through tertiary education for Indigenous students?* Of specific interest were enabling programs that provide pathways to tertiary education that might be comparable to the FNTP. What could we learn from each other?

In our early conversations and time together, we learned that not only was the story of Indigenous peoples in both countries similar, the academic challenges, particularly at the tertiary level, greatly mirrored each other. We found that the PTS program and the FNTP were struggling with many of the same challenges. Both programs had recently undergone a redesign and revitalization after their respective reviews, so we felt that we, and our students, had much to learn from each other that could inform our programs and our own Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) moving forward. Driven by a passion to ‘do it better’ for Indigenous students preparing for university, we began a collaboration to share our best practices and methodologies. We also wanted to connect our students to each other so they could learn from each other, share their experiences and culture and be a support for each other. As educators, we are passionate about enabling Indigenous academic success in ways that bridge cultures and attend to IWKL, thus the name of our paper, *Bridging Cultures Over-Under: Enabling Success from the Heart*. It reflects our passion and celebrates the spirit of learning in two worlds achieved through the pedagogy and practice of TES and BW. In an earlier paper, *Bridging Cultures Over Under: Digital Navigation to Create Liminal Spaces of Possibility* (Hogue & Forrest, 2017), we shared outcomes of our pilot project. We have continued to grow the project with each new cohort of students. In this paper we share further outcomes from our project and what we as educators working in our respective programs, as well as collaboratively over the past three years, have learned about our own SoTL.

**Project design and outcomes**

Since the first pilot, we have had six live WebEx sessions between Northern Hemisphere Spring 2017 and Spring 2018 semesters, which we will continue in 2019. Given the extreme time difference, and sometimes weather, it has been somewhat challenging to organize these sessions. We have worked around 4:00 p.m. in Lethbridge which is 8:30 a.m. the next day in Darwin; both times are outside the regular program hours. To invite participation, given the time and day difference, Michelle provided dinner for the students in Lethbridge and Joanne provided breakfast for the students in Darwin. Given the complexities of the students’ lives and the fact that the time was outside regular program hours, participation in person was voluntary. We visited over a meal and shared experiences, stories, projects, and culture over the course of the six sessions. The sessions were video recorded, and the recordings posted to our closed Facebook page so those students who were unable to attend could still view the session and participate in the assignments and online discussion. Many conversations happened as well as project sharing. We asked the students in both programs to reflect on their own academic journey and share what they feel their program offers that enables their success differently than their previous educational experiences. Of the many outcomes, four key factors, common to both programs, stood out: relationships, safe spaces, collaborative learning, and time to ‘get it right’*.* The following is a summary of these four key elements.

*Relationships*

The Western education system is foundationally based on the individual, rather than on relationships and relational learning. For many Indigenous learners, this is a challenge in mainstream education and can be a very isolating experience. It is one of the main reasons Indigenous students leave tertiary education (Hogue, 2018). Relationships are an underpinning foundation and at the heart of the success of both programs; relationships between the students themselves and, as importantly, between the students and the instructors. Several academics have written about the intersecting spaces in curriculum as spaces to be inclusive of Indigenous and Western knowledge systems (Aikenhead, 1998; 2001; Aikenhead & Michell; 2011; Bartlett, et al, 2012; Brayboy & Maaka, 2015; Hogue, 2018; Knapp, 2013; Martin, 2008; Nakata, 2002; Ober & Bat, 2007; Yunkaporta, 2009). It is within these intersecting liminal spaces that there is great possibility to develop relationships, have ethical and open conversations and come to places of ethical and equitable learning through TES and BW. Such relationships take time to develop though, which does not fit with the time-focused ways of the Western system. One FNTP student reflected that: *…in our ways we don’t just jump into a relationship. We listen and observe to see if that person is someone we want to have a relationship with or if we feel comfortable and safe with that person. Relationships take time. I like the FNTP because we have an entire year together so we have time to do that and we even develop good relationships with our instructors that we can carry forward* (FNTP student, 2017).

The key to developing good relationships is to put aside judgment and to accept students as they are and at whatever level they enter into the program. We have found in both our programs that students are afraid of being judged. For many, their experience in the Western education system has been one of judgment – of being lesser than or different, and often judgment is negatively equated with evaluation. When we are writing expectations of students for our course, we include the question: *What are your expectations as students of me?* At the beginning of one particular student in-take in PTS (also requested by FNTP students), it was voiced tentatively at first and then more forcefully by a student: *Don’t judge me*. Continually unpacking that statement has been an eye-opener for our learning and growing as educators particularly around assessment. Another PTS student reflected and spoke to the importance of relationships:

*Going through this PTS course I want to gain confidence and a better understanding of myself. I want to be ready for university when I am ready. Walking through the door and meeting new people I was nervous and scared because I am fresh out of high school. I was placed in an environment with older people and they have more experience than me. I was wrong, I was accepted, and I fit in. I love the people in my group and I would not change them for the world* (PTS student, 2017).

As educators we have found that in developing strong relationships with our students their fear of judgment lessens and they are willing to participate more fully. Such relationship development requires safe spaces and takes time.

*Cultural Safety*

A key to the success of our programs, is the creation of a safe space for our students in which they are able to authentically work and share their experience. Many of the students talked of: … *feeling free to speak*; *… feeling safe in the program*; *… feeling understood.* The students in both the FNTP and PTS come from different Indigenous backgrounds and families with different complicated relationships and histories that we, as outsiders, regardless of our heritage, do not have knowledge of. Developing the relationships, as described above, allows for a safe space for trust-building, which supports the alleviation of tensions and challenges that can arise in bringing such complexities into the classroom dynamics. We clearly discuss the necessity of a safe and equitable learning environment for all students; personal, familial, and community tensions are to be left at the door so that we can individually and collectively work in an ethical way in a safe space. At first, there are some uncomfortable tensions and resistances, but most often the students come together and truly share. Comments such as: *I would never have talked to [name removed] if it wouldn’t have been for being in this program because our families don’t talk to each other* (FNTP student, 2016); or *I like that I can say whatever I need to say in this program and it stays here* (FNTP student, 2016); *I like the confidentiality. It makes me feel safe* (FNTP student, 2017). At an Indigenous education conference in Hawaii two years ago, a former student of the FNTP, now doing her Master’s degree reflected openly:

*The one thing the FNTP taught me was tolerance. In creating a safe environment in the program, I learned that my various opinions of certain community members and other families are very biased and are not necessarily accurate. I learned that sometimes what I thought was really based on others’ opinions or gossip and not on my own experience. After the FNTP, I would see those same students throughout the years at university and I would still stop and ask them how it was going. I didn’t have to be best friends with them but I could still be nice to them. Now some of those same students are in my graduate program. If it weren’t for the safety of the FNTP I don’t think I would have got to know them* (Former 2012 FNTP student; 2017).

Nakata (2004) discusses the need for recognition of the complexities and tensions in the ‘in between spaces; for understandings and structures to be reframed. It is this reframing that has been a focus of both our programs, with the aim to demystify academic structures, language and literacies, thereby creating inclusion and safety for Indigenous learners to operate effectively whilst maintaining their identity. Australian Maryann Bin-Sallik’s landmark paper (2003) on cultural safety in higher education for Indigenous students, argues that Indigenous higher education success is anchored in Indigenous students having access to opportunities and culturally safe environments. She highlights that even though there may have been failure at school, students were “… able to dispel the racist notion of Indigenous intellectual inferiority” (p. 24) in safe environments. It has been highlighted by learners in the PTS program, that the in-between spaces are critical to ethical and safe debate; with a focus on the ‘safe’, to explore inclusion. A 2018 student in PTS, expanded on safe to voice that there has been too much aggression and that: … *safe places* for all to voice your opinion and have a discussion: *… without being judged or shot down* (PTS student, 2018), are essential to moving forward in life and in problem solving: *… rather than just being angry, suffering mental illness and ending up in the same place.* The combined methodology of TES and BW offers a ‘safe zone’ and this resonates with the “ethical space” described by Knapp (2013). A 2017 student from PTS reflected on a WebEx session as a:

*… safe space for students in both programs to talk to each other. The interaction between me and fellow students was also something that has made me feel more relaxed and comfortable, being able to relate to them (when we were all nervous at the beginning) and also learning about them and where they come from was something that I believe has helped all of us. I look forward to more interactions with our new friends in Canada and also learning more about their way of life* (PTS student, 2017).

We have found safe spaces are critical to our program because it allows our students to ask the difficult questions and to talk frankly about their experiences without judgment. Importantly, it enables an authentic and honest engagement between the students and between the students and us as educators, whether or not we be Indigenous.

*Collaborative Learning*

Collaboration is key to the Indigenous paradigm and IWKL. It is only recently in the Western academic environment and with the changing 21st Century needs, that “working together” has become a more acceptable way to learn (Romaniuk, 2018; Scager, et al, 2016). In the Eurocentric-Western system, such working together has traditionally had the connotation of ‘cheating’, ‘plagiarism’; the ‘stealing of one’s ideas’, et cetera. Supporting collaboration is an important aspect of both the FNTP and PTS. As educators we have noticed a natural fluidity occurs between working together and working alone. Students will come together collectively for some time and then move to work on their own. One student said: *Our culture is about the collective. We share our knowledge but in school you are not allowed to. It’s considered cheating. But if I know something I should help someone who doesn’t, then we both know* (FNTP student, 2017). Both programs have a strong focus on collaborative learning between the students as well as with the lecturers. The lecturer is the ‘guide on the side’ so that students not only know how to work together but independently in preparation for university realities. Students in both programs range in age from 18 onwards, with most being mature age students coming in with a wealth of experience. Many students come from different lived experiences, Indigenous cultures and backgrounds. In the PTS they are drawn from all parts of Australia, although most students come from the Northern Territory, the north of Western Australia and the North of Queensland and into the islands of the Torres Strait. Working collaboratively for PTS students is often a struggle at first but they have their indigeneity and their ambitions to be successful at university as a commonality, which brings them together. This is also true for FNTP students who largely (90-95%) come from the surrounding communities. While the surrounding communities belong to the same confederacy, they are each unique and independent of each other. Both programs focus on collaboration as learning communities. One PTS student reflected on our WebEx sessions as a point of collaborative learning:

*I believe we’ll have many things to talk about during our course of learning and bridging, it importantly brings a great learning opportunity for all of us. We as Indigenous people in Australia are also divided to many extents by where we live and come from and the level of education and most importantly the level of culture you’re exposed too. At the end, education and having to work together makes us aware of the issues and we can deal with them better rather than being arrogant and looking down on someone for those reasons. We have a great diverse group from all aspects and backgrounds, but at the end of the day we are all Indigenous people and traditional owners of our own right* (PTS student, 2017).

The students have connected in ways that were not expected. They have created bonds over the similarities of their educational journey, their histories and have enjoyed learning of their unique cultures. They are discovering they are part of a wider network and that collaboration expands that network and opens doors of possibility.

*Adequate Time*

The Western education system is foundationally linear. It is timed on a start to finish learning scale, whereas in the Indigenous paradigm, learning is constant and cyclical, like the circularity of the medicine wheel (Hogue, 2018); each time around one learns a bit more. Such a way of learning supports Jerome Bruner’s (1960) “Spiral Curriculum”, where concepts build on each other in a continuous and spiral fashion. The process, rather than time, is the focus. Sometimes our students simply need more time to create those bridges and develop the necessary skill set to move forward.

One of the great challenges we experience in both programs is the brevity of the semester system and the spaces between. In both programs, students take a core set of courses (in Canada) or units (in Australia) before moving forward into their program of choice. Sometimes, they are not successful in a course/unit or leave for a variety of reasons, and sometimes they simply require more time to create the bridges they need to grasp the concepts or to be confident they are a valued part of the university system. In both programs, students are able to come back into the program to repeat the courses/units until they have successfully completed them. This is a recent change for the FNTP. One repeating student in the FNTP said: *I like that I can come back and retake a course in the program that I didn’t complete well and still continue on my academic journey. I feel like I’m learning better and I don’t feel like a failure. I just need more time* (FNTP student, 2017). Both programs are designed to give the students the time they require to get the skill set they will need to be successful in their university program. Having the ability to come back as they need until they have completed the core requirements so they have the needed bridging foundation, supports IWKL.

If we are to enable success of Indigenous learners to and through tertiary education, then as educators and policy makers we need to redefine success in ways that are inclusive of the Indigenous paradigm and IWKL. Success in the Western system is most often defined by accomplishment attained largely in a competitive way – achieving a certain grade or the highest mark in the class, or a grade better than someone else’s. For Indigenous students, it is less about grades and competition and more about achieving personal goals as is often described in their reflections throughout our programs. While the traditional Western system is focused on timelines of accomplishment and success, we reframe the concept of success and timelines to be: the necessary time it takes to successfully create the bridges between Indigenous and Western paradigms for our learners; this time is unique for each student.

**Our SoTL reflections**

As educators teaching in our respective enabling programs we understand the challenges for Indigenous learners, which has forced us to continually examine our SoTL because what ‘works’ for one cohort often does not work for the next cohort. Each cohort is unique and the individual students in each unique in the challenges and skill set they bring with them. This ‘not working’ is often evaluated through the negative deficit lens in the Eurocentric-Western system. We work to reframe that deficit lens to an enabling lens of ‘what works?’. What enables Indigenous student learning and success in higher education? As scholars we feel it is critically important to step outside the traditional restricted model of teaching and explore inclusive methodological approaches that engage and retain Indigenous learners. That is both challenging and at times uncomfortable and we often feel isolated in our unique positions within the Eurocentric system.

Having the opportunity to collaborate and share our experiences, our methodological approaches to teaching, and our classrooms, has greatly enhanced our SoTL. The transition and transformation that takes place for many of the students is hard won and as educators the relationship is such that we go through the struggles with them to make meaning of the learning and our place and the students’ place in that learning. It should never be underestimated what processes a student has gone through just to walk in the door. The journey is never dull, at times it is treacherous, but it is also immensely rewarding and forever challenging. As educators we constantly question how to do it better. Key to ‘doing it better’, to our SoTL, we feel, is developing and building relationships.

*Michelle*

As a scholar of Métisheritage, I do have an understanding of Indigenous reality, and the challenges in bridging cultures. My own experience of being the first in my family to pursue post-secondary education, and of being the only female the chemistry department had ever hired when I began at the UofL, certainly informs my SoTL. I understand deeply about marginalization, about different learning styles, and importantly how important it is that curriculum and ways of teaching are relevant to learning. While my own heritage may inform me, it remains that I am a guest in Blackfoot Territory. Thus, I have taken time to develop relationships both in the community as well as with my students. This is key to the success of the FNTP but also importantly to my own SoTL. I am constantly learning how students learn. I don’t just deliver curriculum, but rather constantly examine my methodological approaches to teaching so that I am able to build the bridges to the Western curriculum with them.

*Joanne*

As a non-Indigenous educator in an Indigenous specific enabling program I have constant questions. How can I be the best educator the students need me to be? How can I relate to my students? How can I make sense of policy and best practice? How do I attend to all the needs of the students in the cohort? What assumptions do I bring to the teaching and learning? How do I enable change? How do I be an effective ally? The journey has been a wild ride of learning, and in all honesty the students have been my best teachers. Framed through the SoTL rationales of professionalism, pragmatism and policy (Shulman, 2000), I have begun to explore my own SoTL of which the work with Michelle is a considerable part; as my guide, my collaborator and my friend. There are considerable tensions and challenges in education, but for me what remains is a strong desire to get to the heart of learning; to enable change, redefine success, create choice and empower agency.

Now an adjunct at BIITE, Michelle has gone to Darwin an additional three times to participate in the PTS program, teach and collaborate with colleagues and to teach back to the students in Canada. In the dead of winter, January and February 2019, I will go to Lethbridge to participate in the FNTP as a visiting fellow. Our goal is to continue to grow our SoTL, to better enable Indigenous student success.

**Conclusion**

Profoundly challenging for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, we advocate, is that educators must examine their entrenched SoTL and explore methodological practices that incorporate IWKL. This exploration needs to occur in safe spaces for academics as well, so that there is room for multiple re-iterations without the risk of the negative evaluation of ‘failure’ or ‘damning critique’ when trying different methodological approaches. While many educators support the philosophy of TES or BW, they are nervous and do not know where and how to begin. Among their many concerns, they are afraid to make more cultural mistakes, are concerned about their lack of Indigenous knowledge, and of suffering a backlash from those Indigenous peoples who feel that this work should be done by Indigenous peoples themselves. This fear can pose yet another roadblock, that of inaction, to advancing Indigenous academic success. If we are to wait until there is a critical mass of educated Indigenous peoples in the education system, or in places of power to create these changes, it will be too late. As such, it is imperative that Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators address the SoTL in a different way and in doing so make a concerted effort to co-learn and work together, ethically and from the heart, in the space of possibility, the liminal space (Hogue, 2018) between cultures. As Elder Albert Marshall says of this journey of TES for BW:

“We, Together”

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