

Self-Location: My Journey of Four

Jessica Irvine

University of Regina

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Dr. JoLee Sasakamoose

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My name is Jessica Irvine and I grew up in Estevan, Saskatchewan. Both my parents and my two brothers still live in our hometown. I am the only one in my family who completed high school and continued on to post-secondary. I pursued my undergraduate Bachelor of Education degree in Core French Education at the University of Regina. I met my common law husband during my studies and today, I call Regina my home. I am a Core French elementary school teacher for Grades 1-8 in Regina Public Schools. I recently returned to the University of Regina for my Masters of Education in Curriculum and Instruction. ED 800 is my second class. During my undergraduate studies, I had always considered returning back for graduate level courses. However, until a year ago, I did not feel I knew enough about myself to apply.

I believe research came to me in my desire to define who I am. Before I took my first graduate class, I was not in the habit of continually identifying who I am. When challenged to answer that, I had no idea of the answer. I was fortunate to hear Justice Murray Sinclair speak at his session in Regina, SK in February 2016. He said each child should know the answers to these four questions: “Where do I come from? Where am I going? Why am I here? And, who am I?” (Sinclair, 2016). It has become habitual for me to return to Sinclair’s four questions when I approach my own identity. Sinclair (2016) said that the “ability to answer those questions has been impaired by the experience of residential schools”. I believe that non-Indigenous people, including myself, struggle to answer these questions in a decolonized lens. That is to say most Canadians would not provide answers that link them to Indigenous knowledge or in an Indigenous approach. I will attempt to write my own self-location through Sinclair’s questions.

I will introduce myself again by trying to “decolonize” my previous brief biography from the first paragraph.

My name is Jessica Irvine. I was born and raised in Treaty 4 area and as a child, treaty education was not included in my schools. I was never cognizant that the land I called home was more than just Canadian land. I was not taught about the treaties nor what it meant for me to respect the treaties. My education was taught in a white settler perspective. My education prior to returning for my Masters was disrupted in winter 2016 during my first graduate class. The discussions, assignments, and articles read in the class revealed my lack of awareness to my own white privilege. I was left with emotions of anger and confusion, as well as a desire re-identify myself. Kovach (2009) says that we “need to open ourselves to those teachings [Indigenous teachings] and then give ourselves time to integrate them so that we can be of use to our community” (p. 50). The construction of a new identity will need time. I recognized the necessity to expose myself to Indigenous knowledge such as stories, ceremonies, and culture. 

When I accept that “I am a commoner by birth, with no inherited rights of property or privilege other than race (color white)...” (Chambers, 2012, p. 23), I can move towards “where am I going” (Sinclair, 2016). I recognize that I currently reside on Treaty 4 land in “*oskana kâ-asastêki*” which means “pile of bones” in Cree (McLeod, 2007, p. 6). The Cree name for “pile of bones” represents the “retreat of the buffalo from the land” instead of “celebrating the empire” (McLeod, 2007, p. 6) as the name Regina does. I acknowledge that the land I live on is not mine and I want to learn to respect this shared land. While I write this paper, I am in my backyard which has a view of a field towards the west of the city. I live on the edge of town and the space and freedom has allowed me to indulge in feeling disconnected from city life. In the past year, I have learned that across this field, about one kilometre, are the gravesites of the children of Regina Indian Industrial School (Weidlich, 2016).



Figure 1. My Backyard (Irvine, 2016).

I have lived here for six years and the history of the graveyard near our community is not common knowledge to my neighbours, or even the people of our city. Being outside is where I feel the most connected; consequently, I spend a lot of time in my backyard. My place is a short walk from where approximately forty children never had a chance to grow up (Weidlich, 2016). 

It distressed **be** know this and, specifically, to know that this information had been previously hidden from my knowledge. Kovach (2009) says that “place gives us identity” (p. 61) and the knowledge of the close proximity of the residential school changed my perception of my place. The awareness of my lack of knowledge of Indigenous history in my own community was one of three reasons I decided to return for my Masters of Education.

I have been a Core French teacher in Regina elementary schools for eight years. My third year found me working in a community school. I was not immediately accepted by the students and they were extremely wary of me. Unsure of the reason for their apprehension, I jumped into my job teaching French vocabulary and grammar. I thought teaching them to love French with fun lessons would change our relationship. However, a large majority of my students were from different Indigenous backgrounds. Many lacked knowing their own identity and culture. The last thing they wanted was the white French teacher teaching them a language that wasn't even their own. My lessons failed and I often left for home in tears, unable to determine what I was doing

wrong. If I was ever to gain their trust, I knew I had to dig for the reasons why I was not succeeding as their teacher. The students were not resisting me – they were resisting the French language and culture I was trying to impress upon them. There was more to French than language and grammar but it was not what I had been taught to focus on in my teacher training. I decided to take a risk by stepping out of the comfort zone of the French vocabulary units. I created a unit to integrate First Nations and Métis culture which I believe is linked to Canadian French culture.

I planned a school “Carnaval”. Students immersed themselves in learning First Nations and Métis activities related to the Carnaval de Québec and the Festival du Voyageur (Winnipeg, MB). For three years, the staff and students participated in this event I initiated. As a school community, we learned together aspects of the blended First Nations, Métis, and French culture that is often not recognized when teaching Core French. Jigging, making bannock, storytelling, making Métis sashes, making Quinzees, and many more elements were included in the event. Students took ownership and pride in the event which they helped to organize. The students learned to trust me because I took the time to understand them and to meet their desire to know more about their own story. I choose to begin to fill the cracks of the Core French curriculum. Battiste (2008) said:

...any attempt to decolonize education and actively resist colonial paradigms is a complex and daunting task. We cannot continue to allow Indigenous students to be given a fragmented existence in a curriculum that only offers them only a distorted or shattered mirror; nor should they be denied an understanding of the historical context that has created the fragmentation (p. 508).

I was heartbroken when I transferred to my new school in 2014. I was questioning the curriculum, our colonized society, and my own white privilege. Nonetheless, I had learned the indispensable value of listening to my students' stories. This experience was also my second reason to pursue further education.

Stories are why I relate best with the narrative element of qualitative research. I love reading and listening to stories. It is also why I can relate to the storytelling element of Indigenous approaches. Narrative is used in Indigenous cultures in many ways such as to remember their history, to teach their youth, to heal, and even now, to apply in Indigenous research methods. I began using stories in my own life which has changed how I approach who I am and where I am from. I was not accustomed to sharing my personal story but I have encountered the healing powers that come from disclosing my story:

I tell the stories not to play on your sympathies but to suggest how stories can control our lives, for there is a part of me that has never been able to move past these stories, a part of me that will be chained to these stories as long as I live (King, 2003, p. 9).

I cannot grow personally or professionally if I do not release my story or admit it to myself. By not letting my story be alive, I am unable to move forward and let my story help others.

A large part of my story and the third reason I returned for my graduate studies is because of personal conflicts. I knew my personal struggles could emerge in my professional life in a positive way. My personal challenges stem from my mother who struggles with a gambling addiction. Since I was 12 years old, when I began to babysit, I was expected to help my parents financially. The gambling has left my mother to rely on manipulation and emotional games in building relationships with family and friends. I believe her gambling is the root of my parents' volatile relationship. Since I was a young child, they have fought often, both physically and

emotionally. These fights lead to my parents separating, multiple times in the past and still off and on today. Police appearance in my family home has become routine and not unexpected. I consider my mom's gambling addiction to have left me with an unhealthy mother. Even though I now live in my own home two hours away, the loss of not having a well-adjusted mother or a stable family has left me feeling unbalanced. A gambling parent can affect children to "experience the physical and existential loss of a parent, loss of the relationship with the gambling parent, loss of trust and reliability, and extensive tangible losses" (McComb, Lee, & Sprenkle, 2009, p. 421). The stress of the unstable relationship with my mom left me unhealthy physically, emotionally, mentally, and spiritually (Lee, 2006, p. 2).

In 2013, I realized I had to create boundaries with my mom to realign myself and to discover "where am I going" (Sinclair, 2016). Once I created boundaries with my mom, I was able to start focusing on learning who I was and wanted to be. The "me" who had become 100 pounds overweight, was often emotionally upset, had no connections to spirit, and was mentally unclear of who I am. Overall, I was very unhappy. I began to work with my physical self by running, something I never did, and lost sixty pounds. Successfully changing me physically filtered into healing me emotionally. I was able to see who I was without the shadow of my mother and her addiction. My mom still does not believe that her gambling addiction is a problem. She says she does not agree that I should be pulling back from our relationship. Unfortunately, I cannot allow our relationship to grow when it interrupts the balance of myself. Not having contact or relationship with my own mother is not an easy choice. Nevertheless, I have learned that it is through my own healthy and well-adjusted self that I can influence change around me, hopefully one day this includes my mom.

It was through the four directions of the medicine wheel, I went through my healing journey.

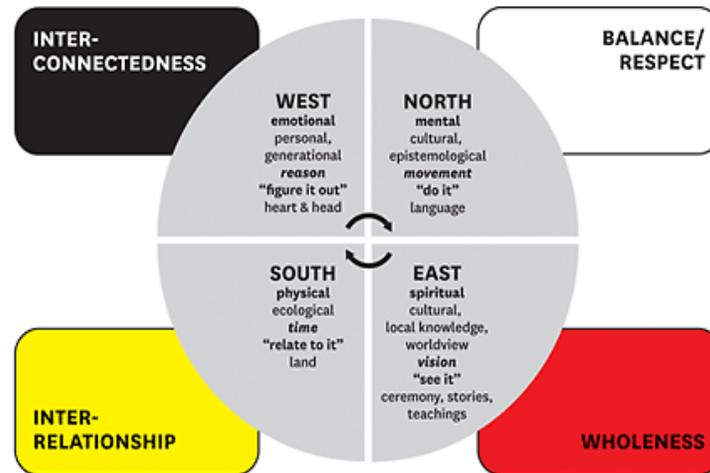


Figure 2. Medicine Wheel (Bell, 2016).

During my healing process, I did not make the initial connection of my journey to the Indigenous teachings of the medicine wheel and the four directions. When introduced to the medicine wheel, it helped me to determine how to seek balance. The medicine wheel has taught me to not depend on time moving forward to heal me. It is up to me to work on how I grow that will allow me to move forward. Once I was composed emotionally, physically, spiritually, and mentally, I decided to return to my graduate studies and research. Elder Mary Lee says (2006): "We need to try and balance these four parts that were given to us, to function as people" (p.2). Now, I feel prepared to look at "why am I here?" (Sinclair, 2016).

I believed there was something missing in how I taught which I could not isolate. I needed to find a way to pinpoint the missing piece which brought me to apply to take my Masters of Education. I did not know exactly what I was looking for, though I had some ideas, and I went in with an open mind. My first class challenged me to look at myself as well and how

I teach and how I bring curriculum to my class. I read many articles and books by authors, such as Cynthia Chambers, Thomas King, Verna St. Denis, Jennifer Tupper, and Valerie Mulholland, who all focused on First Nations worldviews and conflicts. Through their diverse viewpoints, I began to learn about why I am here for myself and why I am here as a teacher.

I believe my graduate studies has begun to work on my understanding of myself spiritually. My worldview changed and I believe that “curriculum makes space like nothing else” (Kovach, 2009, p. 6) in Saskatchewan schools. I examined the Core French curriculum and discovered the space within the document itself. While it encourages to examine First Nations and Métis culture, it is only through French content and is predominantly from a white settler perspective, often taught by those who are trapped in a colonized perspective. I cannot change how curriculum is currently but I can become a teacher and a researcher who learns to use my skills to develop “good relations”, which is “*miyo-wîcêhtowin*” in Cree (Kovach, 2009, p. 19).

This brings me to today and, specifically, as to why I am in this ED 800 class that focuses on Indigenous research. I am not Indigenous but I believe that non-Indigenous people can still nurture Indigenous viewpoints and teachings in their research. It is not an easy task and I find myself consistently thinking of what I say and how I say it – in my classroom, in my graduate classes, and even to myself. I have a new voice that encourages family, friends, and colleagues to become aware of our colonial views. Deloria (1981) encourages this vital step to a decolonized view: “Historical dislocation is important to recognize because it speaks directly to the conceptions of progress held by the majority and confuses the standards minorities are measured against” (p. 13). Similarly like Indigenous knowledge and methodologies is necessary to disrupt the research community, I believe integrating Indigenous views is likewise necessary in our educators and schools (Kovach, 2009, p. 12).

There needs to be a transformation of blending Indigenous in both research and education so that Indigenous ceremonies and knowledge can shared with all treaty people. I cannot:

...take for granted my treaty rights and my treaty responsibilities; as I do want this for my children, or my grandchildren either. I do not want to take for granted this opportunity I have been given to live differently than my ancestors (Chambers, 2012, p. 35).

I believe I have a responsibility for my research to reflect the very truthful reason for why I am here – because of the colonization of Canada and the loss of place for Indigenous peoples. If my research develops in the typical colonial viewpoint, then I feel I am not leaving anything valuable to society. I will no longer be building positive relationships with all of my students and with the community itself. If “basic attitudes create new forms of oppression, unique to the age but ancient in impact” (Deloria, 1981, p. 26), Western and Indigenous research and education need to find equilibrium. Without some type of change in institutions, these colonized attitudes will continue to develop and be passed onto future generations.

I will not be able to participate in the change for the university systems or school systems by lingering in a non-decolonized view. I can change what I do and how I do it – in teaching my students, in the research I am involved in, and in my daily life and motions. Kovach says “[w]e have the right to know who we are, and that this right involves responsibilities – but there are people to help us out, that we are not alone” (p. 10). Essentially, I am a “work in progress” which answers Sinclair’s (2016) fourth question of “Who am I?” I am willing to become a teacher and a researcher who values Indigenous knowledge, methods, and values. It will be an ongoing process that will meet resistance:

Decolonization is not “something that can be “done” by teachers or “to” students, nor is it a technique that can be lifted, decontextualized, and applied. It is rather a way of thinking

about knowledge and the processes of teaching and learning as it emerges within and through relationships – between students, teachers, communities, and places (Grande, 2010, p. 204).

To end my story, I go back to the lessons I learned at the community school. I earned my students' trust with patience, by listening to and understanding their story, and by not giving up. Decolonization can emerge through the trust that is developed within my relationships. Even within myself, I had to be patient with myself, listen to my own story, understand myself, and not give up. Once I had achieved trusting myself, I was able to question and challenge the colonized society I grew up in. I believe, with support and through research, that my renewed purpose in deconstructing the colonized education system will not “fade into the sunset” (Kovach, 2009, p. 53). Now it is time to “get to work” as “the real job is ahead of us” (Deloria, 1993, p. 2).

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