

# Exploring Place from an Aboriginal Perspective: Considerations for Outdoor and Environmental Education

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## **Abstract**

*This article reports on a recent study about Outward Bound Canada's Giwaykiwin program for Aboriginal youth. A key finding that emerged from the study was the need to design contemporary Aboriginal education programs based on a recognition of the evolution of Indigenous cultures and languages in close relationship with specific geographical areas. The implications of these findings are presented for both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators interested in incorporating an Aboriginal understanding of place in their practice. Recommendations are also provided for grounding outdoor and environmental education programs in local Indigenous traditions.*

## **Résumé**

*Cet article rend compte d'une récente étude menée auprès du programme canadien Giwaykiwin « Outward Bound » pour la jeunesse autochtone. Une découverte importante qui est apparue dans l'étude était le besoin de concevoir un programme contemporain d'éducation autochtone basé sur la reconnaissance de l'évolution des cultures et des langues autochtones en étroite relation avec une géographie spécifique. La portée de ces découvertes est présentée à la fois aux éducateurs autochtones et non-autochtones intéressés à inclure une compréhension autochtone du lieu dans leur enseignement. On prévoit aussi des recommandations pour mettre en place des programmes de sensibilisation à l'environnement selon les traditions locales des autochtones.*

**Keywords:** Indigenous, Aboriginal, outdoor, environmental, place, education

## Terminology

In order to recognize and honour the importance of certain terms and concepts, I will follow Graveline's (1998) example by capitalizing them in this article. These terms include: Aboriginal, All My Relations, Earth, Elder, Indigenous, Métis, Sweatlodge, White, and Western.

## Background

My recent master's study, *Outward Bound Giwaykiwin: Wilderness-based Indigenous education*, explored students' and staffs' experiences with Outward Bound Canada's Giwaykiwin program for Aboriginal youth. This article provides a brief overview of the study and then discusses one set of implications of the research in greater depth: the implications, for outdoor and environmental program design, of understanding how the evolution of Indigenous cultures and languages has occurred in relationship with specific geographical areas.

Non-Aboriginal scholars of outdoor and environmental education often allude to the possibility of learning from Aboriginal epistemologies and their orientations to the natural world (Henderson, 2007; Sharkawy, 2008; Vikander, 2007). Many other contemporary scholars call for greater attention to a sense of place, a feeling of being at home in and connected to one's geographical surroundings, in outdoor and environmental education (Brookes, 2006; Curthoys, 2007; Lugg, 2004; Wattchow, 2006). The concept of place is especially relevant to culturally-based programs in Indigenous peoples' territories where land, language, and culture are inextricably linked (Cajete, 1994). Based on the findings of my research with Outward Bound's Giwaykiwin program, I hope that this article will provide insight into the relationship between culture, language, and geography in Aboriginal cultures and the potential implications of this for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators alike.

My study, which critiqued the worldwide organization of Outward Bound and assumptions about the universal benefits of expeditionary adventure education, took a critical approach to Outward Bound Canada's Giwaykiwin program through a lens of decolonizing Indigenous education. Outward Bound Canada founded the Giwaykiwin program in 1985 to provide culturally responsive leadership and personal development opportunities in expeditionary settings for Aboriginal youth (Outward Bound Canada, 2006a). As a Canadian of Métis, Austrian, and Norwegian descent, my experiences as an instructor with the program had left me questioning its cultural-responsiveness (Lowan, 2007). I wondered if, as our program literature stated (Outward Bound 2006a, 2006b), we were truly fostering an environment where Outward Bound and Aboriginal philosophies and traditions were equally represented. Similar to Brookes (2006), I questioned the universal applications of outdoor education for contemporary Aboriginal Canadians, such as the "Outward Bound Model" that evolved within a European perspective (Walsh & Golins, 1976). Do Outward Bound's techniques and philosophies that were originally developed by Kurt Hahn to train young British sailors on the Atlantic Ocean in the early 20<sup>th</sup> Century (Miner & Boldt, 2002) provide the most culturally responsive approach for working with contemporary Aboriginal youth in Canada? Since Giwaykiwin instructional teams are typically composed of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal instructors, I was also curious about how to effectively include non-Aboriginal instructors in our

courses. In order to address these kinds of questions, I employed a collaborative ethnographic methodology (Lassiter, 2000), through a lens of seeking to decolonize Indigenous education.

## Decolonization

Widespread loss of land, language, and cultural traditions along with higher rates of health and social problems for Indigenous people worldwide are commonly identified as the results of European colonialism (Battiste, 1998; Graveline, 1998; Simpson, 2002; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). According to Simpson (2002), supporting decolonization—that is, addressing the lingering effects of European colonialism while promoting a revitalization of Indigenous cultures—is a key consideration for contemporary Indigenous education programs. Battiste (1998) also states, “Aboriginal peoples throughout the world have survived five centuries of the horrors and harsh lessons of colonization. [However,] they are emerging with new consciousness and vision” (p. 16). Key factors in the decolonization process include: the revitalization of Aboriginal languages, epistemologies, and pedagogies; recognizing the importance of the land; and privileging Indigenous voices, the involvement of Elders in education, and Indigenous control of Indigenous education (Battiste, 1998; Simpson, 2002). This concept of decolonization heavily influenced the perspectives taken and the methodology of this study.

## Methodology

The historic misuse and abuse of research conducted with Indigenous peoples has been well documented (Lassiter, 2000; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). A history of positivist anthropological and ethnographic approaches have left Indigenous peoples worldwide wary of researchers generally, especially non-Indigenous researchers. I selected collaborative ethnography as a guiding methodology out of concern for the Aboriginal participants in this study.

## Collaborative Ethnography

As a qualitative methodology, collaborative ethnography (Lassiter, 2000) challenges the researcher to go beyond simple member checking—merely verifying findings with the research participants. In collaborative ethnography, the researcher and research participants collaborate to discuss the *meanings* of the findings. Research participants are also given the opportunity to participate in the production of the final product in such a way that their voices emerge more authentically in the text. Lassiter proposes that this form of inquiry produces work that is accessible to a wider range of people outside

of the academic world and most importantly, to the research participants themselves.

## Methods

I began this study intending to recruit eight to twelve research participants, including former Giwaykiwin students, Outward Bound staff members, Aboriginal Elders, and community members who have been involved with the program. I successfully recruited nine participants. Outward Bound Canada provided me with contact information for two of the participants and I knew the other seven through my previous association with Outward Bound and Lakehead University. Three of the participants were Aboriginal and had been Giwaykiwin students. One of these former students had also worked as an assistant instructor on non-Aboriginal specific courses. Four of the participants were former Giwaykiwin instructors who would self-identify as “White.” The remaining two participants were program administrators from Outward Bound who would also self-identify as “White.” Unfortunately, no Elders were successfully recruited. Participants were initially approached via a brief introductory electronic mail. If they expressed interest in participation, an official letter of invitation was presented along with appropriate consent forms by land-mail or in-person. Once consent was established, interviews were conducted.

Along with following standard ethics protocols, I attempted to honour Aboriginal cultural protocols. As Lickers (2006) describes, this can be challenging for the contemporary researcher owing to the cultural and religious diversity within Indigenous communities. Keeping this in mind, I also offered participants a small gift of tobacco, a practice for requesting the sharing of important personal information (CIHR, 2005 in Lickers, 2006). Maintaining this as a constant part of my study proved personally challenging when I was faced with non-Indigenous participants or those who were unfamiliar with the offering of tobacco. It challenged me to be transparent and consistent in explaining my intentions and the meaning of the offering to all participants. Regardless of their cultural background, all participants had the chance to receive tobacco if they wished.

My research data collecting techniques included keeping a limited field journal, collaborative examining of participants’ course journals and other course artifacts (photos and souvenirs), and undertaking informal tape-recorded interviews. I developed a series of questions distinct from, but reflective of, my research questions to assist research participants in reflecting on their experiences with the Giwaykiwin program. Following the suggestions for collaborative ethnography by Lassiter (2000), I provided the participants with repeated opportunities to be involved in the construction of the final text. After transcribing the interviews, I sent the raw transcripts to each participant

via electronic mail along with three guiding points for reflection. I asked them to share any further reflections that they had had since our initial interview, thoughts that arose after reviewing the transcript, as well as their ideas for sharing the findings of this study. Following Creswell's (2002) suggestions, once I had collected their responses to these questions, I employed a colour-coding system for identifying strongly emerging themes and sub-themes. Next, I began analyzing and interpreting the findings. I selected portions of the interview transcripts that seemed relevant to my original research questions as well as others that spoke strongly to the participants' experiences. Finally, I presented these findings, organized in themes from all nine interviews, to each participant for data verification, confirmation of their anonymity, and any final reflective thoughts that they wanted to share. This final process was conducted primarily by electronic mail. In two instances, I carried on an extended dialogue with participants over areas of concern that arose through the collaborative process. In both instances this resulted in three more rounds of dialogue by electronic mail.

The final stage involved deepening the discussion and interpretation of the participants' experiences with reference to further literature. Throughout the writing process, I kept in touch with the participants through electronic mail, letting them know when I reached significant points in the study, asking for clarification on certain comments and, if requested, sharing findings as they developed.

Lassiter (2000) emphasizes the importance of research participants being involved as much as possible in every stage of the research process. This includes the dissemination of the results. In our post-interview dialogue, I included a request for the participants to share their ideas on ways to disseminate the findings of the study. Some participants put a lot of thought into this and came up with creative and meaningful responses. These included suggestions for sharing the findings through written articles, public presentations, television, creative writing, and artwork. All of the participants' suggestions were greatly appreciated.

### Limitations

The findings of this study were simultaneously limited and enhanced by my inherent perspective as an insider academic (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999)—a researcher with connections to both the Outward Bound and Aboriginal communities. They were also limited by the openness and willingness of participants to be forthcoming, which I attempted to enhance by being culturally and socially sensitive. Several potential Aboriginal participants, both former students and staff members at Outward Bound, indicated initial interest but withdrew before interviews were arranged. This affected the participant sample size and ratio of staff members to students and Aboriginal to

non-Aboriginal participants. As a result, a majority of the participants (six out of nine) were non-Aboriginal Outward Bound staff members. This took the findings in unexpected directions and resulted in more of a cross-cultural focus to this study than initially anticipated. The absence of Aboriginal Elders among the research participants also limited the findings and forced me to rely more heavily on literature for guidance.

### Indigenous Connections to the Land

One overarching finding emerged in this study—the need to consider each Aboriginal community’s symbiotic connection to a specific geographical area when designing educational programs that teach ‘traditional culture’ to contemporary Aboriginal youth. Some of the Outward Bound staff members who participated in this study expressed an awareness of this concept, however the experiences of the students who were interviewed suggest that improvements can still be made to the program. The following section explores the centrality of Indigenous connections to specific geographical areas through relevant literature and quotes from participants in this study.

Contemporary scholars of Indigenous education describe how Indigenous cultures have typically developed through a symbiotic relationship with a specific land-base. Cajete (1994) discusses this connection in the tradition of his own people, the Tewa, in everything from clan names and hunting rituals, to regional ethnobotanical knowledge of plants as food and remedies. Landmarks are also integral to the identities of many Indigenous cultures. Referring to a conversation with Alfonso Ortiz, a Tewa Elder, Cajete (1994) discusses the Tewa saying of, “Look to the mountain,” referring to Tsikomo, a sacred peak from which their people draw strength. Cajete (1994) describes the influence of regional diversity on connections to the land:

Every cultural group established this relationship to [their] place over time. Whether that place is in a desert, a mountain valley, or along a seashore, it is in the context of natural community, and through that understanding they established an educational process that was practical, ultimately ecological, and spiritual. In this way they sought and found their life. (p. 113)

Rosser (2006) and Waldram (2000) also suggest that recognizing the historical and contemporary diversity of Aboriginal cultures in North America prevents pan-Aboriginalism, the over-generalizing of Aboriginal cultures.

Cajete’s (1994) description of Indigenous peoples’ approach to their traditional home territories contrasts with the philosophies of many current contemporary outdoor education programs such as Outward Bound, as described by Miner and Boldt (2002):

Life enhancing experience is obtained through the sea, the mountains, the wild lake country, the desert. Outward Bound has evolved since those early Aberdovey

days. But it has not departed from the essential essence of Hahn and Holt's essential concept of an intense experience surmounting challenges in a natural setting, through which the individual builds his sense of self-worth, the group comes to a heightened awareness of human interdependence and all grow in concern for those in danger or in need. (p. 37)

This quote illustrates the philosophy that personal development may occur through overcoming physical, emotional, and intellectual challenges in a natural environment. A growing number of scholars (Brookes, 2004, 2006; Curthoys, 2007; Lugg, 2004; Stewart, 2004; Wattchow, 2006) challenge this approach because the focus is on approaching the natural world and its inherent challenges as a *vehicle* for personal and group development. In contrast, these scholars emphasize the need to foster a sense of place—helping students to feel at home in, rather than separate from or challenged by, their natural surroundings.

In response to a question about integrating Outward Bound and Aboriginal philosophies, one staff member began by identifying the land as a common link:

I think the place where those two worlds meet is on the land and I think that that is the central tie that bridges all of the Aboriginal cultures in Canada—the importance of the land. Being able to find each person's unique and tangible connection to the natural world...

He also discussed the feelings of connection that may be awakened during expeditions on ancestral lands:

For me one of the powerful things about these courses is for young people to walk in the places where their ancestors were and I think that's a real gift for us to share that with them, but also to provide the safety network to allow them to experience that as well, to travel on routes that were important to their ancestors.

The same staff member also linked the role of a sense of place, a feeling of being at home out on the land, with the development of environmental stewardship in contemporary youth:

I think that without experience on the land, young people can't truly be good stewards of the land, and unless they've had that moment of truly connecting with land and feeling its pull, that it's hard in [more] than a superficial way, to be a strong steward or advocate for land. I think that seeing that on the map and knowing that that is a place that we're taking people to, and to make that pilgrimage to those places as they sleep on the earth and spend that quiet time there, that they are going to absorb some of the ancient feelings of those places that for many of them will be an awakening and hopefully something that they remember for a long time... to know that their heritage and stewardship is a very ancient thing.

These comments suggest a concern for the environment, not often explicitly mentioned in Outward Bound Canada's literature (Caspell, 2007; Outward

Bound Canada, 2006a, 2006b). Orr (2004) and others (e.g., Asfeldt & Hvenegaard, 2007) propose that spending significant amounts of time in natural environments is a prerequisite for developing feelings of empathy or passion for environmental advocacy or stewardship. However, the Western concept of environmental stewardship positions humans as custodians who are separate from the natural world (Merchant, 2004). In contrast, most Indigenous cultures' epistemologies situate humans as *part of* the natural world. Marker (2006) suggests that recognizing the web of interdependent relationships between humans and all other creatures is fundamental to the epistemology of most Aboriginal peoples. Positioning humans as custodians of the land, set apart from its other inhabitants, is contrary to this concept.

Simpson (2004) argues that contemporary discourse on Indigenous people and environmental stewardship often reduces and essentializes the Indigenous worldview, misinterpreting or ignoring the fundamental importance of spirituality and the concept of All My Relations, or connectedness and respect for all things. As Durst (2004) also states, "All of Earth's creatures hold ... powers including animals, birds, fish, plants, trees, rocks and soil" (p. 4). Pepper and White (1996) further discuss the concept of All My Relations:

First Nations people who continue to rely on traditional values and institutions look at the world and see themselves as a part of it—see themselves in a caring and supportive relationship to all human beings. They feel the earth is the source of life and give reverence to the earth and to the wonders of life coming from Mother Earth. They give spiritual regard and respect to the animals, the plants, the land, and to the universe. They feel related to everything and everything is a part of them—all things are connected. They see beauty everywhere. They respect themselves and others. (p. 5)

While some of the Outward Bound staff members who were interviewed expressed an understanding of the Indigenous sense of place and the importance of grounding programs in local Indigenous traditions, the student participants in the study expressed slightly different experiences. Their comments suggest that while they may have experienced something resembling a sense of place during their Giwaykiwin courses, these feelings evolved more from unguided personal experience rather than culturally grounded instruction. For example, one former Giwaykiwin student reflected on a three-day solo experience:

I loved it. I just sat there and wrote in my journal and just enjoyed being on this rock that I was on. For me it was super positive. I saw a caribou... You're on the Earth, you can hear critters munchin' away down there...

When asked whether her feeling of connection to the land or, experiencing a sense of place, happened naturally or due to the cultural context of her course, the same student stated:



I think that it was a combination of things. I think someone could go and sit in the bush and feel that connection, but I think too with that experience, the connection happened with people. I think the connection, the length of time out there, the challenge of the portages, the canoes, point A to B affected us as well. Cuz when you did have time to sit down you really appreciated what was there. I think it's a combination of things. I think people are meant to be out there, it's our natural instinct to be in the bush. My spirit was like, "Thank you' for bein' out here!" To be in that canoe on the water, or on the rock, camping. That's the whole point. It really helped me prioritize what's important from a bigger personal perspective. I'm getting emotional now thinking back to being out there. I miss that.

When asked how the Giwaykiwin programs might be improved to facilitate more of a sense of place for Aboriginal students, the same student responded:

I think they need to tweak the program to teach Native people at their level and learn from them. Their agenda was so strong the entire time, Outward Bound has an agenda, but it almost conflicts in some ways with the Native way....

In response to these kinds of concerns, one staff member stated:

Giwaykiwin courses are simply those that work with Aboriginal students. Giwaykiwin courses are primarily rooted in Outward Bound Canada's traditions and philosophies with varying degrees of Aboriginal cultural content.

He continued:

For me it's the idea of having programming that's custom made for communities and being able to fine-tune the elements of the program to particular cultures, not just using a standard approach. Each contract is specifically designed and defined in conjunction with the community to reflect the course objectives and values they would like to see promoted. This includes the level of cultural framework and traditional content. For the Arctic... expeditions, this means very little cultural content and more of a focus on cultural sensitivity to learning styles as leadership curriculum is delivered. For the [Northern Cree], this means creating a forum for youth to develop specific assets that Outward Bound delivers strongly on and for youth to spend time in the presence of inspirational and appropriate role-models.

This approach differs from the suggestions of proponents of decolonization (Battiste, 1998, 2005; Goulet, 2001; Graveline, 1998; Hampton, 1999; Kirkness, 1998; Simpson, 2002; Thiong'o, 1986; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999) who propose that Indigenous education programs must be grounded *primarily* in Indigenous philosophy and pedagogy. Hermes (2000) problematizes this type of blended approach and states that in blended courses, Aboriginal content is often devalued and underemphasized. The experiences of the student participants in this study seem to reflect Hermes' concern. While they expressed generally positive experiences during their time with the Giwaykiwin program, they also suggested that their courses could have

been more culturally responsive. Staff members interviewed also expressed a somewhat dichotomous perspective—recognizing the importance of honouring Indigenous traditions while also promoting Outward Bound’s philosophies and traditions. Given these kinds of concerns, how might Outward Bound adapt its program design and implementation in order to support decolonization efforts and facilitate the development of a culturally relevant sense of place? Also, what are the implications of these findings for educators of non-Aboriginal students? The following section addresses these kinds of questions.

### Next Steps

Based on the findings of this study gathered through collaborative discussion with the research participants, I will now explore steps that might be taken to enhance the Giwaykiwin program’s ongoing development. The following recommendations will focus on the overarching finding of this study—grounding Indigenous education programs in the teachings and traditions of respective Indigenous cultures in order to support decolonization and cultural revitalization. It should be noted that Outward Bound has already initiated changes to the Giwaykiwin program similar to some of these recommendations, with goals set for further program development. These recommendations may also prove useful to both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal educators interested in enhancing their understanding of Aboriginal cultures or those working with Aboriginal youth. Recommendations include: considering fundamental changes to course curriculum, conducting courses in communities’ traditional territories as much as possible, increased involvement of local Elders and other respected knowledge keepers, increased Aboriginal instructor development, and increased cultural awareness training for Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal instructors alike. These recommendations are outlined in further detail below.

### Reconsidering Curriculum Design

Educational scholars of decolonization (e.g., Battiste 1998, 2005; Simpson, 2002) emphasize that Indigenous education programs must be designed from an Indigenous perspective. This seems to contradict Outward Bound’s current approach where courses are based on an Outward Bound model with adjustments made for each course to include elements of Aboriginal culture. Why not the reverse? What if Outward Bound’s partnering Aboriginal communities and instructors set the initial course curriculum with elements of standard Outward Bound courses added afterwards? What would this entail?

A fundamental shift to courses based on Aboriginal traditions rather than the Outward Bound model might include, for example, changes in the over-

all goals of each course, how food is gathered and the types of shelters used. Rather than seeking personal and group challenges in a forbidding wilderness, perhaps the overall goal of a course could be to deepen students' connection to their ancestral land while imparting traditional skills and knowledge. As an alternative to purchasing all of a group's food at a grocery store prior to a trip, students could be taught how to harvest food from the land. Rather than exclusively using nylon tents, why not teach students how to make shelters in ancestral ways? The meta-narrative uniting all of these kinds of initiatives is the recognition of the longstanding connection between Indigenous peoples and their land. Re-evaluating curriculum design from an Aboriginal perspective would help Outward Bound Giwaykiwin's program to further support decolonization and cultural revitalization efforts.

### Selecting Course Locations

Regional considerations become acutely important in land-based Indigenous education where geography and culture intersect. A challenge that the Giwaykiwin program faces is reconciling logistical, financial, and safety concerns with cultural and geographical considerations. For example, it is Outward Bound protocol that Outward Bound staff must scout a potential expedition route before a course can be conducted in that area. However, due to logistical and financial constraints, pre-course scouting in Aboriginal communities' home territories is not always possible.

Another issue that emerged in this study was the desire on the part of some Aboriginal communities to expose their youth to other areas of Canada. For example, youth from northern Ontario or Quebec traveling to southern Ontario to participate in an Outward Bound course might also have the opportunity to visit big southern cities for the first time. However, if the intention of a course is to provide a culturally responsive learning environment, conducting the course in each respective community's territory seems most appropriate. As previously reported in the findings, there is a growing awareness of this concept within Outward Bound and I have recently observed that strong efforts are being made to conduct courses in community's traditional territories. In the case of courses with Aboriginal youth from various communities, courses could be grounded in the traditions of the host area.

### Increased Elder Involvement

Simpson (2002) and others (e.g., Battiste, 1998, 2005; Graveline, 1998) emphasize the value of including Elders in all aspects of Indigenous education programs, and outline their importance as keepers of traditional knowledge and culture. Simpson highlights the support and guidance that Elders

provide not only for students, but also for instructors. She describes the importance of structuring programs to include Elders on a regular basis, not just as occasional guest speakers. This continuous format creates an environment where Elders are comfortable and able to teach in a more relaxed and traditional way. Likewise, Battiste (2005) speaks about the importance of a generational transfer of knowledge: “By building relationships with the land and its inhabitants, [Elders] come to understand the forces around them. Each generation then passes their knowledge and experience of the social and cultural contexts of their ecological origins to succeeding generations” (p. 122). Student and staff participants in this study recognized the importance of this concept and called for increased Elder involvement on Giwaykiwin courses. For example, two former students suggested that Elder involvement in significant portions of the Giwaykiwin expeditions should be facilitated. This kind of extended contact would provide students and instructors the opportunity to learn from Elders, the most qualified cultural teachers.

### Increased Aboriginal Instructor Development

Several research participants also highlighted the ongoing challenge of attracting and maintaining a pool of qualified Aboriginal instructors. They identified two possible solutions to this problem: recruiting and training future instructors from partner First Nations’ communities, along with actively recruiting other Aboriginal people (Métis, Inuit, those living off-reserve) for Instructor Development programs. In addition, I would propose that if courses were designed and delivered with greater input from communities, more opportunities could be made to select instructors based on criteria other than those used by Outward Bound. Selecting instructors based on standard adventure industry norms such as certifications may also exclude highly qualified cultural teachers and leaders. Another benefit of having increased numbers of instructors from students’ communities is that they would be more likely to speak their Aboriginal languages. Local instructors could also act as translators for other instructors not familiar with the local language.

### Cross-Cultural Staff Training

Several non-Aboriginal staff members who participated in this study suggested that they could have been better culturally prepared for their Giwaykiwin courses. One program administrator suggested that cross-cultural awareness or decolonization workshops could be a part of annual staff training. Staff training could also be a time to introduce Elders into the Outward Bound community as part of increased ongoing involvement. Ideally, cultural awareness training would be delivered by qualified Elders and community members that could pass on specific communities’ perspectives prior to instructors engag-

ing with their students. Perhaps if this type of approach was successful, non-Aboriginal instructors could become the cross-cultural “allies” that Bishop (2002) and others (e.g., Dei, 1996; Kivel, 2002; Moore, 1997; Weiss, 2002) describe, reducing the need for Aboriginal people alone to speak out for themselves (Graveline, 1998) and promoting cross-cultural cooperation.

I hope that Outward Bound and other interested parties will consider these recommendations in a collaborative and constructive spirit. The overarching theme that runs through all the findings of this study is the importance of grounding Aboriginal education programs as much as possible in the culture and traditions of specific communities.

### Methodological Reflections

Engaging with the collaborative ethnography model (Lassiter, 2000) was a challenging but rewarding experience. From the beginning, I hoped to conduct my research as an insider, in a way that allowed me proximity to my participants in a close but respectful way (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). This was especially important given the historically uneasy relationship between Indigenous people worldwide and the academic, economic, and research communities (Lassiter, 2000; Tuhiwai Smith, 1999).

I learned a lot during the research process about conducting research in general, but particularly in an Aboriginal context. The reflexive research process that I engaged with along with the participants also provided a measure of validity to the study. Repeatedly revisiting the findings with a critical eye provided the opportunity for multiple layers of interpretation of the participants’ experiences with the Giwaykiwin program as well the significance of this study.

The collaborative nature of my chosen methodology was challenging. It required dedication and extra work from the participants and myself. However, several participants expressed their appreciation for this approach. I hope that this work has addressed some of the concerns described by many authors surrounding the historical mistreatment of Indigenous peoples in research such as the misappropriation, distortion, and eventual disappearance of findings (e.g., Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Lassiter, 2000).

Throughout the course of this research journey I remained in close contact with Outward Bound Canada. From the beginning, negotiating my relationship with Outward Bound as an instructor turned researcher was dynamic, challenging, and rewarding. I maintained regular dialogue with Outward Bound, keeping them up to date on the progress of this study. They also continue to regularly solicit and share feedback and advice regarding program development. I am grateful for this constructive relationship and hope that it will continue in the future.

## Final Thoughts

Indigenous (Cajete, 1994; Simpson, 2002) and non-Indigenous (Brookes, 2004, 2006; Curthoys, 2007; Lugg, 2004; Stewart, 2004; Wattchow, 2006) educational scholars alike describe the importance of helping students to develop a sense of place, a feeling of being connected to or at home in their geographical surroundings. Cajete (1994) and Simpson (2002) describe the influence of the symbiotic evolution of Indigenous cultures with a specific geographical area. They propose that, if the intention is to impart cultural knowledge, it is most effective to teach in the area that the culture developed. In this context, teachings come alive as students can see the physical features, hear the sounds or feel the winds present in the stories of Elders and other knowledge holders. A deeper understanding of their community's landscape helps to foster a stronger sense of place for contemporary Aboriginal youth.

From a non-Indigenous perspective, the literature is full of strategies and techniques for exploring sense of place as a means for enhancing students' understanding of their local communities or fostering environmental and social activism (e.g., Andrews, 1999; Brookes, 2004, 2006; Curthoys, 2007; Lugg, 2004; Stewart, 2004; Wattchow, 2006). Incorporating Indigenous perspectives into educational practice with Indigenous and non-Indigenous students alike offers another layer of possibilities and understanding of place.

Educators interested in deepening their understanding of an Indigenous sense of place might consider connecting with respected Aboriginal Elders and teachers in their area. Marker (2006) proposes that facilitating the sharing of Aboriginal knowledge in mainstream educational environments is one way to promote greater intercultural understanding. Sharkawy (2008) also suggests that learning and sharing Aboriginal stories is an effective strategy for incorporating Indigenous perspectives into educational environments. However, she also emphasizes the importance of learning the protocol and traditions for respectfully sharing stories and other forms of Indigenous knowledge before incorporating them into educational practice. Learning and sharing local Indigenous epistemologies and traditions in a respectful manner will lead to a deeper understanding of Indigenous peoples as well as providing insight into living well in partnership with each other and the rest of Earth's creatures.

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## Notes on Contributor

**Greg Lowan**, upon completing his master's degree at Lakehead University, returned home to the foothills and eastern slopes of the Canadian Rockies to pursue doctoral studies at the University of Calgary. **Contact:** gelowan@ucalgary.ca

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