LISTENING BETWEEN THE LINES: REFLECTIONS ON LISTENING, INTERPRETING AND COLLABORATING WITH ABORIGINAL COMMUNITIES IN CANADA

Maureen A. Simpkins
Aboriginal and Northern Studies
University College of the North
504 Princeton Drive
Thompson, Manitoba
Canada, R8N 0A5
msimpkins@ucn.ca

Abstract / Résumé

An enduring premise of qualitative oral research is respectful listening, flexibility in terms of the interviewer's agenda, and community control and collaboration in terms of the findings. This paper describes and examines my own evolving practise and approaches to listening, interpreting and collaborating with Aboriginal communities with reference to decolonizing concepts and frameworks.

Les conditions durables de la recherche orale qualitative sont l'écoute respectueuse, la souplesse de l'ordre du jour de l'intervieweur et du contrôle communautaire et la collaboration en matière de résultats. Le présent article décrit et examine la propre pratique en évolution de l'auteure et son approche de l'écoute, de l'interprétation et de la collaboration avec les collectivités autochtones en se référant à des concepts et à des démarches de décolonisation.

> We must listen for more than just the sounds, listen for more than just the words and phrases; we must try to perceive the context, meaning, purpose. (Ortiz 1977: 9)

Now it is not only commonplace, it is essential for community-based research to include the voices of community members and to be reflective about how that is carried out in the context of decolonizing methodologies within disciplines such as Aboriginal Studies and the social sciences. For researchers involved in qualitative research, individual perspectives and approaches are very much informed by the projects we take on as well as the communities and people we work with. We need to be open to new ways of thinking and doing research particularly in the context of Aboriginal communities and cultures. This paper represents some of my own reflections on listening, interpreting and collaborating respectfully with Aboriginal communities.[1]

My own interest in and passion for listening to the stories and the life experiences of others is the most consistent thread weaving in and out of my experience of qualitative research. Throughout the past twenty-five years teaching and researching in Aboriginal Studies and Adult Education, the opportunity for personal reflection and analysis of how my own style of interviewing, collaborating, listening and interpreting have evolved and changed; the process itself has been somewhat elusive. My experience of qualitative research has strengthened my belief in the possibilities and opportunities provided by collaborative research and have expanded my knowledge about how community-specific knowledge can be integrated into, as well as embodied within, the collaborative process.[2] Drawing on community-specific knowledge is extremely valuable for planning partnerships and research projects based on decolonizing methodologies (Mihesuah, *American Indian Quarterly* 28: (3 & 4) 2004; Mihesuah 1998; *Native Studies Review* 15, (2) 2004; Smith 1999).

There is no question that many aspects of research with Aboriginal communities and organizations have changed drastically in the past ten to twenty years. While there are still researchers who will practice community-based or participatory research in tokenistic ways, there has been much work done by Aboriginal communities themselves to define their own cultural approaches to research, to keep control and decision-making within the community, and to determine their own agendas while still collaborating with non-Aboriginal individuals and institutions. It is against the back-drop of changing collaborative and community-based research approaches that I reflect on my own evolution and learning, and continue the dialogue and questioning necessary to engage in truthful and

decolonizing research frameworks. (Ball 2005b; Davis 2004; Long and LaFrance 2004).

This paper begins by situating myself within the research frameworks I have worked within. Some background to the First Nations Partnership Program at the University of Victoria is also important in order to understand the context of some of my reflections, influences and approaches to qualitative research. What does it mean to research together differently and how do specific elements within decolonizing frameworks greatly encourage the success of intercultural collaboration, listening and interpretation in qualitative research? This paper describes, then, what is meant by "listening between the lines" when interviewing and working collaboratively and will conclude by summarizing lessons learned within the qualitative research process.

Situating Myself

Research is inextricably linked to European imperialism and colonialism and has been used to exploit and misrepresent Aboriginal peoples worldwide (Smith 1999: 1). As a non-Aboriginal woman most often doing research and interviewing with Aboriginal peoples, there is a particular need to situate myself within the work described.

My heritage is a mix of Irish and English roots. My parents both grew up on farms, my mother in Saskatchewan and my father in Ontario. I have heard Aboriginal people talk about "blood memories," which are associations one has to the land and culture despite where and how one has been brought up. I have inherited my parents' love of quieter rural areas, and I have tended to gravitate towards work in northern locations, despite having grown up in a suburb of Toronto. When I finished high school, I left to find work in the Yukon Territory of northern Canada. It was there that I began doing research with Aboriginal organizations and the direction of my life began to change.

In the late 1970s I was offered my first research position with what was, at that time, the Council for Yukon Indians. As Julie Cruikshank talks about in *Life Lived Like a Story,* the 1970s were a time when it was still acceptable for non-Aboriginal anthropologists and researchers to be doing fieldwork and interviews with members of Aboriginal communities (1990: 13). Much has changed since that time in terms of communities creating their own policies for research ethics, protocol and collaboration (Assembly of Alaska Native Educators, 2000; Piquemal 2001). My own approach to research has been shaped by the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal communities, organizations and individuals that I have had the honor to work with.

During the 1980s I facilitated research workshops in fly-in Oji-Cree

communities in north-western Ontario. Soon after I found myself developing and creating hour-long radio documentaries for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) radio that provided a forum for community members to relate their experiences and stories on issues affecting their communities (Simpkins 1990; 1991; 1993). This work, as well as my interest in interviewing, led me to teaching in the Native Studies Department at Trent University in Peterborough, Ontario and, later, to study oral historical methodology as an aspect of my doctoral thesis.

From 2003 to 2005, I worked as a Research Associate with the First Nations Partnership Program at the University of Victoria in British Columbia. Some of the qualitative aspects of the research undertaken, such as interviewing, interpreting and collaborating with some of the partnering Aboriginal communities, will be a focus of this paper.

The First Nations Partnership Program

The First Nations Partnership Program (FNPP) is the name given to the programs delivered using a uniquely developed Generative Curriculum Model. Each partnership involves a two-year, university accredited Early Childhood Education training program that is delivered in First Nations communities through formal partnerships with the University of Victoria. The program has been specifically designed by and with communities who are motivated to participate actively in co-delivery of training within their own region or territory, and to play an active role in bringing cultural content and considerations of community-specific knowledge into the training curriculum (Pence, Kuehne, Greenwood, Opekokew 1993).

The FNPP began back in 1989 when the Meadow Lake Tribal Council of Saskatchewan asked the University of Victoria's School of Child and Youth Care to join with them to come up with a new way of thinking about and promoting child well-being in Aboriginal communities (Pence 1999). The council members were seeking a training program that would embody valued aspects of their traditional and contemporary Cree and Dene cultures and languages, and that would also draw upon useful knowledge from the mainstream theory, research and practice. What emerged from that process was a pilot project and a model for generating curriculum that is bicultural and relies on local knowledge, perspectives, and experiences contributed by Elders and other community resource people (Pence & Ball 1999).

Following a program evaluation completed in 2000, partnering communities requested a follow-up research project to measure the results of their investment in training, and to document and share their successes in improving community-based supports for both children and

their caregivers. This research involved university-based field investigators who worked directly with community-based collaborators who were given basic training in research. Together, group forums and interviews were conducted and documents were gathered for review. After the university-based team analyzed the data, preliminary reports of the project findings were sent to participating communities for feedback and discussion (Ball 2005).

My work specifically focussed on investigating and contributing to discourse about the embodiment of culture in programs that have an explicit goal of cultural transmission, hoping to go beyond a list of tangible curriculum elements to an understanding of the forms of innate cultural authenticity exhibited by First Nations child-care practitioners (Ball & Simpkins 2004).

Researching Together Differently

As I focused on deconstructing the process of investigating the area of cultural transmission of community specific knowledge, I was particularly interested in naming and acknowledging how we researched and worked together as a collaborative team. Augie Fleras (2004) discusses ways to "research together differently" and it is in sharing these ways that we approach the uniqueness of each situation with knowledge and respect.

In this follow-up project we carried out the interviews with FNPP graduates, parents from the child-care centers, and education and child-care coordinators within three regions in British Columbia (Ball 2005). While the communities came up with the initial research questions, the university researchers were also able to integrate their own questions within that framework. The real power in researcher/community relationships lies with those who design the tools (Irwin 1992: 5). Ultimately, it is important for the community to determine its own priorities, and the institutional partners work with those priorities in shaping their own research. Some of the areas of priority research were:

1. transitions to employment
2. community-based service models
3. benefits to parental involvement
4. sustainable programs
5. nurturing cultural knowledge (Ball 2004)

"Nurturing cultural knowledge" was the research area that I worked within, and the priorities of both the community and the university researchers were combined and reflected in the following questions:

1. How is Indigenous knowledge incorporated into early childhood programming?

2. How are decisions made regarding what types of knowledge are incorporated in early childhood programming? Who makes these decisions?
3. How does the incorporation of Indigenous knowledge impact cultural identity, cultural literacy, heritage language learning, and a sense of social belonging in young children?
4. How does the valuing of Indigenous knowledge and the specific knowledge incorporated into child care programs impact the community beyond the children in the program?

As agreed upon by the whole team, after the interviews were done the university team set to work identifying common themes, grouping personal stories within those themes and writing up reports that would go back to the communities for feedback. As Brumble suggests, this process produces a bicultural document in which the assumptions of the Aboriginal community members and the university editors are at work (1988: 11). This was an exciting and stimulating phase of the project. Wasser and Bressler call this phase "the interpretive zone where researchers sift, sort and consider meaning of the field work, and indeed, the group is a tool for reflection" (1996: 7).

The team of co-researchers, Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, community and university-based, worked together within a continuous dialogue that kept everyone focused on community concerns and considerations. Working within a team of people from both the university and the communities, both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal, one could take some risks by asking and contributing questions in a respectful manner. As discussed earlier, this team of people continually clarified, questioned, added to and discussed what certain gaps within the interviews meant within that culture or that region.

Community-specific knowledge is often part of the everyday knowledge within the community such as behavior, gestures, ways of being that are difficult for the person immersed in this knowledge to identify. The collaborative process made it possible for the community researchers and the interviewees to recognize that their own experience, their own ways of being *was* the embodiment of culture in these programs, no matter what their differing experiences of being Aboriginal was. One of the childcare training program instructors described her understanding of the innate authenticity within: "Knowledge, as I have experienced it, is often derived from outside myself; this information is objectified, logical and provable. Listening to the Elders and other community members, knowledge for them appears to be generated from within oneself, and set within the context of their reality" (as quoted in Ball 2003: 94).

While we began by asking about the roles the child care practitio-

ners or administrators play when contributing to cultural knowledge, sometimes the term "role" does not capture the essence of the experience. For example:

> The role of women? I would have difficulty with the word role, actually. More and more as I get older, I see this sort of *recognition of being* as being more important than role. (Campbell Star, in Anderson 2000, preface)

This recognition of being or embodiment of culture can also be described as the sacred cultural, regional and community-specific knowledge within individuals. LaDuke (2005) provides many examples of recovering the sacred in Aboriginal communities. While LaDuke is discussing specific sacred sites such as traditional lands, medicines, genes and patents, the personal embodiment of culture that all the interviewees exhibited can also be viewed as sacred, "worthy of the highest respect" (De Wolf 1997: 1288). The knowledge shared by interviewees was unique, culturally specific and privately held. It was the personal as well as the community acknowledgment of their own cultural contributions to community knowledge that was felt profoundly as part of a process of recovering the sacred within each person, in relationship to the community. Engaging in research allows people, whatever their role, to recognize and acknowledge his or her own contributions in producing knowledge (Kirby, Greaves, Reid 2006: 30).

This can be both exciting and transforming for all members of the collaborative research team. It is also an acknowledgment of the value and importance of the role of community-specific knowledge and people's lived experiences within the research experience.

One of the "ah-ha" moments when discussing cultural programming, occurred as students told stories about how important their training had been in both helping them to understand that their culture was not lost and reconnecting them to Elders to regain the kind of relations that were lost during the process of colonization. These connections were not incidental to the work of creating a cultural program. For instance, some community members might know songs, another might be more fluent in their language, and yet another had experience ice fishing or drying fish in a special location. Those interviewed talked about specific songs that certain Elders had, or the special ways of preparing food, or knowledge of what women should eat when they are pregnant. The development of this network of participating community members reconnected people along uniquely cultural lines, as well as in specifically cultural ways (Vilches 2004: 2).

Within daily life, there is seldom the opportunity to reflect on how or why people develop networks in specific cultural ways. This discussion

regarding reconnecting and networking led to further discussion about the differing Euro-western versus Aboriginal ways of organizing knowledge and teaching. For example, in a Euro-western setting it is assumed that apart from individual experience and the limitations on learning everything, all early childhood education practitioners should know and teach more or less the same thing. In these Aboriginal communities, the opposite was true, as it was precisely the unique contribution that each worker contributed that was discussed by community members with the field researchers (Vilches 2004: 2). The learning and teaching involved taking on future responsibilities and becoming a valuable community member and hence a role model in the process. In terms of being role models for the children, one Elder said:

> Seems like they make an impression on those children. My grandchild saw a caregiver in the store and she said "when can I go back to day care?" And she was in kindergarten and she wanted to go back to the day care 'cause she saw her worker and connected with her. They do make a really good impression on those children as workers. The day care workers are role models. (Elder forum, in Ball and Simpkins 2004: 492)

The non-Aboriginal university researchers grappled with how to recognize the embodiment of culture within the stories gathered and how to portray commonality and do justice to the complexity of all the different experiences of being Aboriginal. While the non-Aboriginal researcher may be able to talk about and identify a respect for salmon, for example, we are often unable to move beyond the cognitive domain and show or explain what it means in practice to respect the salmon (Atleo 1997: 7). The insight and knowledge of the insider or Aboriginal community collaborator is extremely important in all phases of the research to ensure more accurate cultural representation. The contribution of community knowledge is integral to and the backbone of the research practice undertaken (Ball 2005).

Reciprocal Situated Response

As every research project and every community is unique, the approaches to interviewing, interpreting and collaboration call for a "situated response" (Hermes 1997: 23-25). Those of us who have been using qualitative methodologies know all too well that there are no templates. Each community and culture is unique and involves differing and adaptive approaches. Responding to the situation, the history, culture and community-specific knowledge of the community in a reciprocal manner allows one to listen and observe the unique elements in the commu-

nity-based project.

One example of a situated response may be as minor as changing the way we ask interview questions. When interviewing for the FNPP follow-up project, I quickly realized that the questions that were so interesting to me could at times narrow the dialogue a bit too much. As an interviewer I needed to be conscious of keeping the dialogue open, inviting comments and stories about themes not yet considered. I approached the interview as a guided conversation whose goal was to elicit from the interviewee the stories and experiences that were relevant to them and that could be used in qualitative analysis (Lofland and Lofland 1984: 12). This sometimes required that I simply go with the stories and responses of the interviewees and trust that the value and relevance to the research question will emerge as the context of the interviewee becomes more apparent. This not only tests the researchers' commitment to the qualitative process, but also has the possibility of transforming/informing the research process.

In Davis's article "Risky Stories: Speaking and Writing in Colonial Spaces," she describes a project that was shelved essentially because the Aboriginal community did not want their stories to be a part of a web-based educational project. Community representatives "indicated that the researchers' pedagogical concerns regarding how non-Aboriginals heard the story were not a community priority" (2004: 14). As the funding was directed towards the creation of web-based educational sites for the sharing of these stories, the group in question had to let go of the funding and respect the wishes of the community (Davis 2004: 14). This requires researchers both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal to be willing and open to drastic changes in the direction of the research. As a number of scholars have pointed out, it is part of a decolonizing approach to research to be flexible and open to a change of plans (Ball 2005; Davis 2004; Smith 1999).

This type of flexibility is very much reflective of the reciprocal nature of community/ university relationships.

> Indeed, the argument for collaborative research is about augmenting the research process by not only involving more and different types of people, sectors, stakeholders, and perspectives, but also extending capacity for research across those sectors. It is also an argument for recognizing, and in some cases equalizing, the contribution of different kinds of knowing and knowledge. (Kirby, Greaves, Reid 2006: 31)

The university passes on skills and knowledge when training community researchers at the same time that the community is agreeing to share knowledge with the university. The learning goes both ways: from

the university to the community and from the community to the university. The short and long term goals for all the participants is discussed at the outset with the ultimate control over questions and approaches to research methodology staying with the community. The fact that all the players are consulted all along the way, everyone is treated as co-researchers and everyone is open to listening between the lines, sets the tone for a respectful and transformative relationship.

Listening Between the Lines

> Long before I wrote stories, I listened for stories. Listening *for* them is something more acute than listening *to* them. (Eudora Welty in Cruikshank 2005: 76)

Listening is so often an unconscious function of our senses that we rarely reflect on how culturally informed our style of listening is. It is particularly in the process of intercultural interviewing and interpreting data that one needs to look beyond and between the words to recognize and acknowledge the personal, historical, cultural and community-specific context of the interviewee.

> Just as we learn how to read, so we learn how to listen; and these learnings do not come naturally. Nor are they the same across different traditions, listening to which may be as different as reading English and Chinese and Arabic. (Chamberlin 1999: 76)

As I reflect on how we collaborated and listened to each other throughout the project, a number of factors are important to consider, such as the intercultural aspects of listening; how everyone's contribution was valued, and how everyone, whether interviewer or interviewee, was a co-researcher all working toward personal, community and academic goals in spite of differences between the academic and the community-specific experiences of the team. While these differing experiences and perspectives must be acknowledged for the cultural bias that everyone brings to the table, these differing perspectives can also produce a rich and varied dialogue, which in turn informs the conclusions that the group comes to.

In my experience these differences manifest themselves differently in every project, in every region and in every community. For example, in Ross's description of Anishinaubaeg culture, a community regards a person who is worth listening to with the highest distinction. "The highest compliment paid to a speaker is to say of him or her, 'w'daeb-wae,' meaning that he or she is correct, accurate, truthful" (1992: xii). Speech and credibility are closely associated. In order to understand

Anishinaubaeg culture or any other culture, one must be open to learning a particular ethical practice and protocol. In the case of the Anishinaubaeg, Ross suggests that ethics such as non-interference, non-demonstration of anger, respecting praise and gratitude, and the notion that the time must be right, are all aspects that must be acknowledged and honored (1992: v). While these points are specific to Anishinaubaeg culture, having a sense of the cultural protocol is a precursor to learning how to listen within differing cultural contexts. This is reinforced in the Canadian Institute for Health Research: Aboriginal Research Ethics Guidelines.

> Aboriginal communities often have cultural protocols involving interactions within the community. It is important that researchers learn about these and apply them appropriately. For example, it is customary among many Aboriginal communities for someone seeking knowledge or advice from an Elder to offer tobacco prior to asking any questions. This is not the custom in all Aboriginal communities and the researcher has an obligation to learn about the local customs of the Aboriginal community. (CIHR 2005: 20)

Spielmann cautions that one

> can easily fall into the trap of failing to really listen to what one is being told and thus miss the wealth and richness of native cultures, languages, and traditions. A people's stories and texts may be approached as cultural settings, and the concept of culture itself offers one a kind of "living document" which describes culture-specific ways of thinking and doing things. (1998: 24)

Rosaldo writes that:

> The translation of cultures requires one to try to understand other forms of life in their own terms. We should not impose our categories on other people's lives because they probably do not apply, at least not without serious revision. We can learn about other cultures only by reading, listening, or being there. Although they often appear outlandish, brutish, or worse to outsiders, the informal practices of everyday life make sense in their own context and on their own terms. Cultures are learned, not genetically encoded. (1989: 26)

Not only is it important to learn about and practise a specific cultural protocol in order to collaborate as co-researchers, there is also often the need to exercise caution when listening and interpreting stories and community-specific knowledge. To learn and begin to understand the cultural context is also to identify and understand different

styles of communication across cultures. Oludaja adds that because verbal communication styles are learned within the context of the users, "a person needs to be familiar with these various styles and the main values that they reflect" to be more adept at intercultural listening (2000: 4). Also, "living and working in a multi-cultural world requires that we grapple with each others' cognitive universes and learn how to see through the minds of others" (Newhouse 2004: 154). It is this process of how to "grapple" with intercultural listening and/or the "cognitive universes" within Aboriginal community/ university collaborations or partnerships that is the focus of this analysis.

How do we represent the many differing experiences of truth among the collaborative team? Long and LaFrance discuss a commitment to truthful dialogue on Aboriginal research issues. They explain that this type of truthful dialogue means more than a mere exchange of experiences, perspectives, questions and ideas and suggest that this is difficult to capture in writing (2004: 1). As well as being difficult to represent cultural experiences in writing, I would add that one of the challenges to intercultural listening and truthful dialogue is that there are many truths and many differing realities among the Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal researchers working in a team. We are all listening and acknowledging many truths and attempting to represent this myriad of personal and community truths in a respectful and honorable way as we work together.

Besides the differing realities that we are listening to and for as part of the dialogue, it can also be important to look at "what is not said."

> This involves inquiring into what is hidden in language, what is conveyed by signs, what is pointed out, what is repressed, implied, or mediated. What initially seem to be individualistic autobiographical accounts are often considered to be revelations of traditions and recollections of disseminated identities. (Fisher 1986: 199)

These "revelations" or "recollections of disseminated identities" become part of the transformative aspect of qualitative interviewing. In the past, I would have shied away from attempting interpretation or analysis of "what is not said" in intercultural contexts. Wouldn't I simply be inserting a layer of my own cultural bias or assumption into the analysis of data? We all know that these types of cultural assumptions made with little or no consultation with Aboriginal communities are a major reason why research has so often been considered a nasty word. How does one go about interpreting gaps in an interview and in the data, acknowledging all the differing truths and realities within a decolonizing framework?

Reid touches on an aspect of this issue when she asks questions such as, "Do we reveal, if we happen to know from other sources, what the narrator, for whatever reasons, chose not to tell? Do we or do we not respect these forms of silence?" (2004: xxi). These are very important questions that we, as researchers, must ask of ourselves. In Reid's context of editing the life histories of Agnes Alfred, this respect for silence was very much a part of getting to know her history, culture and the particular ways that she decided to pass on or not pass on her knowledge. In the context of the university/ community collaborative team, the interpretation of gaps or silences in interviews also needed to be discussed cautiously and the intercultural or bicultural nature of this dialogue needed to be acknowledged. While these discussions remained dynamic within the FNPP project, this type of collaborative interpretation would not necessarily work in every situation, depending on the degree of trust and the knowledge and respect for the culture and communities involved.

There is no magical formula that does away with the inherent hierarchies within the university team or the intricacies of funding and who controls the budget. Yet, if all members of the university/ community-based team are working as co-researchers and all perspectives are acknowledged, discussed and agreed upon, the team's own unique characteristics may make it possible to have more in-depth discussion, offer opportunity to question assumptions and perceptions and then to produce a more multidimensional report of findings. Often constraints on time and/or community or university politics, to name only a few, are challenges to listening, dialoguing and analysis.

Time is of the Essence

Tedlock (1983), Chamberlin (1996) and Vizenor (1998) have all written quite eloquently and poetically about the time involved when trying to understand the cultural context when listening to stories outside of one's own culture. The time invested on the part of all the partners is key to the successful long-term outcomes of the project. In my role as a research associate with the FNPP project I was fortunate to walk into an existing history and relationship that had been built and nurtured between the University of Victoria and a number of Aboriginal communities in Saskatchewan and British Columbia.

Time is a critical resource in the development of sound collaboration.

> Leadership tends to underestimate exactly how much time is needed – time for the team spirit, trust, confidence and cooperative dynamics to develop; time to establish dialogue

that integrates the research and practitioners' knowledge bases; time for meaning-making by each participant; time for debriefing, sharing and the generation of new knowledge; time to negotiate the research processes, responsibilities and ethical considerations associated with shared knowledge/product generation and ownership. (Potter 1998: 9)

In the case of the FNPP project, time was also needed for travel in order to meet with people face to face. More time spent meeting face to face within the community settings could have further benefited the analysis. We did try to be flexible as much as possible and do what we could under whatever circumstance presented itself. For example, another university researcher and I drove for several hours on a logging road to meet up with someone from a community in northern British Columbia. As it turned out, the person we wanted to interview had been called away from the community. While we still took this opportunity to talk with several other people, the opportunity to talk face to face with the intended interviewee was gone. However, we ended up giving a community member a ride back into the larger center and, in the process, we seized the spontaneous opportunity to interview the individual while we were on the road. As it often turned out, this "chance" interview worked very well because we had several hours in the car together to discuss issues and tell stories.

The logistics of geographic distances, limited funding, and everyone's busy schedules and family obligations, limited the time spent getting feedback and having further dialogue. Consequently, the resulting tension affected everyone involved in differing ways. The university and community co-researchers want to take the time necessary to produce a report that represents the issues, stories and life experiences that will in turn inform future program decisions. At a certain point the whole collaborative team has to accept that they have taken as much time as they could at that point in time.

Conclusion

How has my own style of interviewing, collaborating, listening and interpreting evolved and changed?

My own style of interviewing and listening has become less formal and more adaptive, more informed by those I am interviewing. In other words, I have learned to listen differently and take my cue from the interviewees and the surrounding community. I would also describe the experience of interviewing and collaborating as a window into the Aboriginal cultures and communities with which I have worked. I have learned to be more open and respectful of the inevitable changes that

take place during the collaborative and qualitative research process. And though I am not always comfortable adapting to these inevitable changes, I have learned that being "comfortable" is not a salient point in university/community collaboration and decolonizing frameworks in the practise of qualitative research. It is important to remain flexible, as every community and every project is very different and warrants a situated response and in turn this involves a certain degree of personal risk or vulnerability. "Researching together differently" (Fleras 2004) involves taking risks and being open and flexible to change and community needs, which can be unsettling at times as our academic research foundations are challenged. However, I concur with Fleras; we must consider moving away from how we may have been trained in traditional academic research to do things differently. It is challenging, admittedly, and hence personal and group reflection is necessary.

Elements of collaborative qualitative research practice include taking the time necessary to collaborate and listen in order to build trusting relationships over time and to respond in a reciprocal and situated manner. These are but two of the considerations when doing qualitative collaborative research projects with Aboriginal communities. Working with Aboriginal communities is always a humbling experience because each time I learn much about myself and about how to respond to the unique circumstances of each culture, community and project.

As Smith says, "the challenge is to demystify and decolonize" (1999: 16). For all researchers, I believe this to be an on-going and challenging process. It can be a much richer and productive experience to do this when there is a diversity of opinion and knowledge shared within the research process. This cannot be rushed.

David Long and Brenda Lafrance echo my own sentiments when they conclude their article by asserting, "through our continuing dialogue we will learn to listen to one another carefully, speak to one another wisely, and walk humbly together along new paths of understanding" (2004: 5).

Notes

1. Any opinions expressed in this paper are my own and not necessarily that of the First Nations Partnership Program at the University of Victoria, B.C.
2. The term "community-specific knowledge" is used throughout this paper to mean "knowledge that is embedded in a local geo-cultural community that has evolved over a long period within that setting" (Ball 2003: 86).

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