CONNECTIONS IN PRACTICE

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ISSN 2471-190X

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PRIMARY SOURCES

COLLABORATIVE INDIGENOUS RESEARCH
By Eve Tuck

Collaborative Indigenous Research is a way to repair the legacy of harmful research practices

A recent disclosure from Harvard's Peabody Museum has brought attention, yet again, to the need to rethink the relationships between universities and Indigenous communities.

Recently, the Peabody Museum announced that it has been holding locks of hair collected throughout the 1930s from more than 700 Indigenous children forced into residential boarding schools in the U.S.

University research has a legacy of doing harm to Indigenous communities. However, a new collaborative project is showing how research can be done in a better and inclusive way. (Shutterstock)

The museum has apologized, vowing to return the hair clippings to Indigenous communities. In their written statement, they acknowledge that the clippings were taken at a time in which it was common practice in anthropology to use hair samples to "justify racial hierarchies and categories."

If you grew up outside of Indigenous communities, Black communities, poor communities, and/or disabled communities, you might be surprised to learn that many have had negative experiences with university-based researchers. Nearly 25 years ago, renowned Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith observed that research is "probably one of the dirtiest words in the Indigenous world's vocabulary."

Some of the studies that have done Indigenous communities the most harm were used to justify genocide and land dispossession. These weren't research as we would understand it today — they were white supremacist propaganda. But they are still the legacy of many contemporary fields of science and social science.

Some of these studies amounted to forms of torture deployed on Indigenous people, alongside Black people, people in concentration camps, disabled people and poor people under the auspices of science. These are the sorts of studies that necessitated the introduction of institutional ethics review boards in universities and communities.

Indigenous Peoples have always been researchers. Many Indigenous worldviews, knowledge systems and values are based in inquiry, curiosity and sharing the results of inquiry through storytelling. (Shutterstock)

Legacy of harmful research

Some studies have been coercive, not allowing Indigenous communities the ability to refuse or withdraw. Others have been conducted under duress. Some are deceptive. These are studies that say they are about one thing, but are really about something else.

Many other studies are extractive. Researchers pop up for a time, take what they need and leave. Far more are harmful because they over-promise (they can't possibly generate the change that Indigenous communities desire). Or they are simply time-wasters: they learn something that the community already knew, but no one seemed to listen to them about.

Because of this history and contemporary situation, many people who grow up in Indigenous families are critical of researchers who don't appreciate the real stakes, or real benefits, of research for Indigenous communities.

Learning from Indigenous ways of knowing

Since time immemorial, Indigenous communities have engaged in research activities, even when these approaches to research have been dismissed as unsystematic or not objective. Indigenous Peoples have always been researchers. Indeed, so many Indigenous worldviews, knowledge systems and values are based in inquiry, curiosity and sharing the results of inquiry through storytelling.

In addition to these ways of knowing, for more than two decades another approach to research with Indigenous communities has been practiced by researchers working inside and outside of the university. This approach, what I and others have come to call Collaborative Indigenous Research, is a deliberate challenge to the harmful ways university-based researchers have engaged with Indigenous communities.

This approach is rooted in the belief that Indigenous communities have long pasts, and even longer futures. It begins with the premise that Indigenous people have expertise about their everyday lives and the institutions and policies that affect them. This expertise reveals how institutions and policies impede their hopes and dreams. Collaborative Indigenous Research examines how Indigenous communities can bring about change to policy, practice, and relationships to lands, waters and one another.

This is research that honours Indigenous knowledges, not as something from the past, but as something that is enlivened through our collaboration. This is research that focuses on supporting the agency and self-determination of Indigenous communities, often in collaboration with Black communities and communities that have also experienced colonial violence.

Collaborative Indigenous research

One of the barriers that has kept people from learning how to do Collaborative Indigenous Research is the lack of support for Indigenous scholars who might otherwise be able to mentor newcomers to the field. This is a practice that, like so many other Indigenous ways of knowing, is best learned by doing, and from someone who is invested in the learner's future. However, the same harmful aspects of university-based research that make Indigenous people suspicious of

some research are also at work when Indigenous students stay away from careers in universities.

The Collaborative Indigenous Research (CIR) Digital Garden is one way of removing that barrier, by creating a space for learning, sharing and connecting across the internet in order to grow inspiration and expertise.

As an Indigenous scholar, I am often asked how research with Indigenous Peoples can be done in a more ethical way. This project — which took five years to build — is an answer. The CIR Digital Garden is a new online platform where users can search, read and post brief profiles of their studies.

Each profile includes key information about a study, including location, communities, research questions and methods. Profiles use categories and tags to make it easier to search and browse the site — think Pokémon cards, but for Indigenous research.

Unlike other research databases, the profiles also include the theories of change — how the collaborators think we can bring about social change — and what constitutes evidence in each

*Eve Tuck and Tkaronto CIRCLE Lab youth researchers and collaborators
hold a hand-made banner that reads: 'History erased but never displaced.
WE ARE HERE.' (Eve Tuck), Author provided.*

study. The CIR Digital Garden isn't behind a paywall or written only for an academic audience. The goal is to show how collaborative Indigenous research is already a thriving practice, with important place-based specificities represented in the various profiles.

To give new users a taste of what the capabilities of the garden are, we have already pre-loaded nearly 200 studies, so that you can search and read the types of profiles we hope will someday fill the garden. We hope that these initial 200 will be just a fraction of all of those that university and community-based researchers will add. We have an editorial team in place to review and support contributors in creating their study profiles.

We hope that this garden finds those who have a strong desire to do research differently. We hope this garden can be a gathering place for those who know this work is important, and might thrive with the support that isn't often available in universities. We hope that we can nurture growth away from the harmful legacies of research done to Indigenous communities.

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Recommended Citation

Tuck, Eve. 2023. "Collaborative Indigenous Research." *Open Rivers: Rethinking Water, Place & Community*, no. 23. https://openrivers.lib.umn.edu/article/collaborative-indigenous-research/.

DOI: https://doi.org/10.24926/2471190X.10007

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