COHORTS AND COALITION BUILDING FOR FIRST NATIONS GRADUATE STUDENTS

By

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ABSTRACT

Cohorts are commonly formed in Indigenous undergraduate and graduate education programs. In this dissertation, I critique the notion that cohorts are necessarily safe spaces for First Nations female graduate students and argue that cohorts must be sites for coalition work and building bridges across differences both within the cohort and in mainstream contexts.

I conducted initial and follow-up open-ended semi-structured interviews with 13 women with whom I had worked in First Nations educational contexts in some capacity in recent years, including as course instructor and coordinator of an educational leadership initiative. Semi-structured interviews allowed me to pursue topics raised by interviewees in some depth, and to ask them about topics raised earlier in their own or others’ interviews. The women responded to queries about their educational experiences, thoughts on the beneficial and challenging aspects of cohort membership, views on the importance of First Nations curricula and pedagogy, experiences with voice and silencing in the academy, and highlights of their cross-cultural experiences.

The research revealed that although participants felt that there were many beneficial aspects to their cohort membership, including the supportive environment, shared purpose, and shared sense of humor, a significant number of participants spoke about First Nations identity issues and the frequency and pain of being silenced within their cohorts as well as in mainstream classrooms. Cohort members and coordinators must articulate goals of membership that include building bridges between gulfs of difference, naming issues of power, and planning a course of action for attaining goals so that there will be a shared purpose for and among members. I argue that open cohorts offer the potential for attaining those goals.
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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction to the Research

The other thing I want to say about cross-cultural dialogue, kind of implies that there is some . . . that cultures have an equal position, that there is this position that we just have to go across these cultures. I think that is not an accurate way of looking at where our cultures are positioned, and that our cultures are positioned in a racial way, that ‘culture’ has come to replace the term ‘race’, that people conceptualize it in the way that race seems to be conceptualized, and so it’s a myth or a fantasy that there can be cross-cultural dialogue because there is this inference that we [First Nations] have that there is social equality then, that there is social equality between cultures. And that doesn’t exist because our cultures are positioned in a lower place in our society; we’re ‘lower than’ so that there isn’t equality . . . there can’t be a dialogue across cultures because we’re not positioned in the same way. I don’t know what you’re going to call it though, because if you don’t call it ‘cross-cultural dialogue’, what is it going to be called?

(Liz’s third interview, April 16, 2003)

The quote above, the words of Liz, a participant in this research, is a powerful statement that troubles the notion of cross-cultural dialogue between Indigenous and non-Native communities, by challenging the assumption of social equality embedded in the phrase. Her words also reveal the evolving process she was engaged in while responding, a process similar to my experience in writing this dissertation. Liz’s nuanced response revealed that she had given much thought to and analyzed the notion of cross-cultural dialogue. The pauses, the reuse of words for emphasis, and the question at the end all revealed that thinking about it was an on-going process for her, rather than something with a definitive answer.

This dissertation, in like manner, represents my ongoing efforts to make sense of participants’ words. The core ideas come from and are driven by my multiple discussions with participants, the participants’ iterations, discussions with committee members and others, and my ongoing readings. My thinking has evolved, leading me to discard a sole focus on cross-cultural dialogue among First Nations women to grapple instead with the
question that brings Liz's quote above to closure — “If you don't call it 'cross-cultural dialogue,' what is it going to be called?” And further, what role might cohorts play for First Nations women in the complex process of communicating across differences? As I suggested, my views about these notions have evolved as I wrote this dissertation and likely will continue to do so. Before discussing them further I will first describe the factors that motivated the research.

A recent (2004) report prepared by R. A. Malatest & Associates Ltd. addressing post-secondary education, *Aboriginal Peoples and Post-Secondary Education: What Educators Have Learned*, suggests concrete, insightful approaches to overcoming the barriers placed in the paths of Aboriginal students who wish to participate in post-secondary education. It offers refreshing evidence of a growing awareness of the need for educational institutions to develop a greater understanding of the social and historical barriers Aboriginal peoples have faced, but also of the importance of understanding Aboriginal peoples' ways of being and knowing. The report highlights the research literature that describes programs and practices for promoting Aboriginal post-secondary education.

The report also addresses other barriers to Aboriginal post-secondary success that must be considered, including cultural barriers and personal barriers, which occur to varying degrees depending on such factors as individual lived experiences, opportunities, and beliefs and values. Access programs and community delivery are also touched on in this report. A brief overview of off-campus teacher education programs in three regions of Canada is provided but there is no mention of the impact of cohort membership for these students, or any emphasis on how these students may engage in cross-cultural interactions and contexts. These are two gaps that inarguably need filling.
Germination of the Study

Many scholars, including Jones, (1999), Ellsworth, (1991), and Burbules and Rice (1991), have wrestled with the question of how to effectively engage in cross-cultural dialogue. Scholars such as Giroux (1992) and Burbules and Rice (1991) write in a very abstract theoretical manner, rarely if ever situating their theories in classroom contexts. Others, including Ellsworth (1991), Young (1997), and Jones (1999), effectively blend theory with practice within the context of multi-ethnic university classrooms revealing that they have personally grappled with issues of difference. Jones describes classrooms as one of the Borderlands\(^1\) of the Western city, ethnically mixed spaces ripe for the production of the social ideals of racial equality and dialogue. Yet persistent in the dominant literature are problematic imperialist assumptions of thinking that through dialogue, previously buried similarities may be found, diversity celebrated, and mutual empathy attained.

Some scholars (Jones, 1997; Dlamini, 2001) have explored the limitations of cross-cultural dialogue, others (Sarris, 1993) have examined how practices of reading and interpreting cross-cultural literatures may serve to limit or open intercultural communication and understanding, yet others (Archibald, 1995; Graveline, 1994, 1998) have examined the relationship between pedagogical and institutional practices and scholarship. Still other scholars (Fraser, 1997, Kelly, 2003) have considered the merits of cohorts as one way of creating or maintaining safe discursive arenas where marginalized groups can explore who they are, develop a vision for the future and plan a course of action for attaining their goals. None, however, have contextualized their arguments about cohorts in any depth with respect

\(^1\) Gloria Anzuldua (1987) uses the term “borderlands” to describe the space where two or more cultures brush up against each other and share the same territory.
to First Nations students. How "cohorts" may be locations to prepare students for dialogical and intercultural encounters has not been examined in First Nations contexts.

I have worked with First Nations cohorts (predominantly made up of women) in recent years in a range of capacities and have had opportunities to make observations about group dynamics and the apparent importance members placed on community and network building. Some cohorts required students to take their entire course load together; others were more loosely configured cohorts where students took few courses together but seemed to gather in informal or "non-required" ways on a semi-regular basis. In some cases I observed students who in various subtle and not so subtle ways expressed a strong desire for separation from members of the dominant society in classroom contexts, a desire to be in classrooms where First Nations students dominated in numbers and voice. These observations raised questions for me about cohort membership that captivated my attention and ultimately led to this research.

The Research Questions

As I reviewed the literature on dialoguing across difference, it is clear that the question of voice and silencing for marginalized people is a significant part of understanding the decolonization process in all of its complexity. Aboriginal epistemologies and Aboriginal pedagogical practices are also important considerations. As a result of my observations of First Nations cohorts I wondered what role those sites might play in preparing students to engage positively in cross-cultural communication. In seeking answers to my research questions I conducted my research with thirteen First Nations women who were or had been members of various graduate cohorts. They ranged in age from their mid-twenties to their late fifties and had affiliations with different First Nations from across
Canada. The research questions are:

• What have been the rewards and challenges of participating in cohorts?

• What have been these women's experiences with voice and silencing in the academy?

In formulating these research questions I hoped to open the space to explicate the range and complexity of the women’s varied backgrounds prior to their cohort experience. I sought to demonstrate how those varied backgrounds shaped their worldviews, influenced their decision to become a member of a First Nations cohort, and affected their cohort experiences. I designed my research methods to provide a location for the women’s stories of educational experiences to be told.

My data collection process, analysis, and writing of this dissertation are informed by my position as a First Nations female scholar of Haida ancestry and my experience as an educator. As I considered how my Indigenous lived experiences and grasp of Aboriginal knowledge systems may have influenced how I approached this research, a story that James Clifford (1986) shared in the introduction to Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography came to mind. He suggested that ethnographers are more and more like the Cree hunter who (the story goes) came to Montreal to testify in the James Bay hydroelectric scheme. He was to describe his way of life. When he was administered the oath, he responded: “I’m not sure I can tell the truth

...I can only tell what I know” (p.8). That too is all I can do. I also make clear that the dissertation offers only a partial truth about all that occurred within each woman’s cohort experience. In other words, in theorizing about this research, “It is necessary to focus on the limits of our knowing and to also acknowledge that texts are inevitably and always a site of failure of representation” (Reid, 2002, p.8; citing Lather, 2001).
Overview of the Study

My argument is that cohorts can play a significant role in the academic life of First Nations students. They work for students who desire membership in cohorts with very specific goals in mind, whether those students are Aboriginal or members of other marginalized groups. It is not sufficient that motivation to join a cohort is prompted primarily out of a desire to find a safe place. Based on my analysis and interpretation of the data collected, I argue for the utility of cohorts, but I also argue that an open cohort is more desirable for First Nations students than a closed cohort. I define these two concepts as I use them for the purposes of this dissertation.

A closed cohort is a group of graduate students with the shared feature that all members are of First Nations ancestry and/or are working in First Nations educational contexts at some level. In their program of study students take all courses together and complete their “closed” program within the same time frame. Participation in Indigenous gatherings may also constitute an aspect of closed cohort membership.

An open cohort is a group of graduate students who are primarily but not necessarily of First Nations ancestry, and may be from a range of disciplines. Membership may be open to any individual with interests rooted in First Nations progress. Students take one or more courses together, with the balance of their courses taken as members of mainstream classrooms. Participation in Indigenous gatherings may also constitute an aspect of open cohort membership.

Students in the study were in both open and closed cohorts. Inarguably, cohort membership provided a space for these thirteen women to deepen their sense of identity as First Nations women. It also represented a location where students could grapple with decolonization issues with a shared sense of knowing and history, without the assumed expectation that it is their role to educate the oppressor, as is often the case in mainstream classrooms. Most certainly, there was no need to argue for an Aboriginal perspective. Over and over again participants spoke of being placed in the position of having to resist persistent
efforts by members of the dominant society to silence their voices in ethnically diverse classrooms. Those experiences left a strong distaste in the mouths of participants and a reticence to engage in cross-cultural interactions. But silencing that largely went unresolved also took place within their cohorts. I found that the women experienced tensions between and among members that typically arose as a result of differing worldviews and experiences.

Rising out of this data, I argue that cohort members cannot continue to ignore such intra group and intergroup differences. The issues in either context will not go away. Dialogic encounters within and between cultural groups are unavoidable and necessary projects. Cohort members must articulate goals of membership that include building bridges between gulfs of difference, naming issues of power, and plan a course of action for attaining goals so that there will be a shared purpose for and among members. As Reagon (1983) stresses, if you stay too long in so-called safe spaces, you will not develop the skills to handle things when you begin to let others in who are not like you. She states, “You don’t do no coalition building in a womb” (p.359). A closed cohort, where all classes are taken together, might be likened to such a barred room, depending on how the cohort is structured, because there are fewer opportunities for intergroup encounters. I argue further that in order for places of retreat to be nurturing there must not be gatekeepers whose only role is to arbitrarily limit the issues that may be discussed, who, in effect, silence those who stay abreast of many issues. Lastly, a critical perspective must be engaged by cohort members to analyze process and pedagogy as well as content on an ongoing basis.

Formation of ethnically homogenous cohorts such as First Nations cohorts does not, in itself, guarantee that these sites will be safe spaces for students, nor does it guarantee that a mutually supportive environment will be created where students will affirm each other. The
formation of such cohorts does not necessarily mean that individual and collective goals will be agreed upon by cohort members, that students and instructors will plan a course of action for attaining their goals, or that those sites will be relatively safe discursive arenas that ultimately support coalition work and productive cultural bridge building. But I argue that open cohorts offer the potential for attaining such goals. My argument in support of open cohort membership is based on my analysis of the data provided by the thirteen female First Nations participants in this research, along with their analysis of their various cohort experiences, and the conditions and recommendations they articulated to create safer discursive arenas within a cohort or otherwise. No doubt the inclusion of male voices would impact on these findings, but are impossible to predict. That is another project.

Membership in such a cohort is open to include allies, people who are interested and informed about First Nations history and contemporary issues. That is, an open First Nations cohort is inclusive of people who have been willing to do their own homework rather than to those who assume the right of membership just because they are interested in First Nations causes and wish to contribute to fixing the "problems." Non-First Nations members must come to the cohort willing to listen more than they speak in a context where the themes are First Nations, first and foremost. In other words, they must be willing to come to our territory in more ways than one.

This dissertation is comprised of seven chapters. In chapter two, I review the literature on cross-cultural dialogue, on the role of cohorts for post-secondary students, including First Nations students, and on coalition work and cultural bridge building. I trouble the notion of cross-cultural dialogue but also make clear that I support the view that working across difference is an "unavoidable and valuable project" (Narayan, 1988:32). I
argue that recognizing and understanding the sometimes hidden forms of silencing that take
place in university classrooms for students with alternate worldviews is critical to cross-
cultural encounters. The full commitment of instructors and students to positive change is
integral to the transformation of university classrooms to make them more socially just. I
describe the research context and research methods in chapter three, argue for the need to live
a commitment to emergent research design, as Tom (1996) describes the practice of altering
and adjusting the original research design if the motivation for change is sound, and conclude
the chapter by discussing my position as First Nations researcher.

Chapters four, five, and six present my interpretation and analysis of the data. In
chapter four the research participants provide descriptions of their respective cohorts
including both benefits and challenges of membership. I explore how my theory of an open
cohort format arose from the data, particularly as the data addressed the importance of
participants affirming their identity as First Nations women. Participants consistently
expressed a desire that university surroundings must be reflective of their identity and that
Aboriginal people must be reflected in powerful ways in academic institutions. In chapter
five, I address participants’ experiences with silencing in university classrooms, both within
cohorts and mainstream classrooms. I also discuss notions of safety, and the motivation for
participants’ desire for separation from a steady diet of participation in mainstream
classrooms. The risks of cohort membership are also discussed in this chapter, including, for
example, some participants’ arbitrarily limiting the issues and perspectives that may be
discussed. Lastly, in this chapter, I argue that these programs must be rich in Aboriginal
content and pedagogy, and that Aboriginal scholars must be increasingly visible in stature
and numbers. In chapter six, I trouble the notion of cross-cultural communication, emphasize
the importance of Aboriginal content and pedagogical approaches, and argue the importance of students moving from cohorts to coalition work. In chapter seven, I revisit the research questions and clarify the state of my thesis argument, which has been honed through the evolutionary process of writing the dissertation. Next, I articulate principles for cohorts and coalitions and conclude by laying out possibilities for future research.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

In this chapter I review and critique the literature on three discrete yet connected concepts or notions. They include the notion of cross-cultural dialogue, the creation and functions of cohorts, and the link between coalition work and bridge building between cultures. As I suggested in the introductory chapter, the notion of cross-cultural dialogue is problematic, in part because of the way marginalized cultures (including First Nations) are positioned in relation to the dominant society. Here I examine the perspectives of various scholars on cross-cultural dialogue and argue their limitations more fully while also making clear, as Narayan (1988) insists, that working across difference is an unavoidable and necessary project.

I then review the literature on cohorts. While First Nations cohorts may provide safer spaces for affirming identity and building community, I argue that they ought to serve a greater purpose. Cohort members must also engage in goal setting and do the groundwork for more purposeful and productive dialogical and intercultural encounters. Next, I discuss the formation of alliances and coalitions, making clear how different scholars define and distinguish between the two notions and presenting my own usage of the terms. I argue that if we are to build coalitions among people of different cultures it is essential that we recognize and understand the sometimes-subtle forms of silencing that take place in university classrooms for students with alternate worldviews. The full commitment of instructors and students to positive change is vital if university classrooms are to be transformed and rendered more inclusive and socially just, whether in cohort contexts or mainstream settings.
Finally, I suggest that while the notion of building bridges to connect cultures has its limitations, the intentions and visions with which its theorizing is infused suggest a more proactive stance than the notion of cross-cultural dialogue does, and therefore renders it more palatable for First Nations contexts. That is, the motivation for bridge building is for “transformation of ourselves and the world” as Keating (2002, p. 522) describes it. Also, I argue, bridge building ought to be an inseparable aspect of coalition work.

Cross-Cultural Dialogue

The Limits of Cross-Cultural Dialogue

“Them” always stands on the other side of the hill, naked and speechless . . . “them” is only admitted among “us,” the discussing subjects, when accompanied or introduced by an “us.”

(Trinh T. Minh-ha as quoted in Alcoff, 1991, p.6)

Alison Jones (1999), a Pakeha scholar, discusses a study that she conducted, with Maori scholar Kuni Jenkins, at the University of Auckland. Jones opens by succinctly and clearly summarizing the now commonplace calls for multiethnic communication in educational rhetoric, where talking and working across differences in power and ethnicity are advocated. In describing classrooms as a “borderland” Jones suggests that because they are often the most ethnically mixed places, they have come to provide an idealized location for fostering the modern social ideals of racial equality and dialogue. Such suggestions for dialogue are rooted in the possibility of, and desire for, “mutual empathy” as key to the development of a “multi-voiced and equitable culturally diverse society” (p. 299).

However, Jones “troubles” the calls for dialogue across difference. She makes clear that she sees limitations in the desire for dialogue on the part of the “dominant group,” and

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\(^2\)This sub-title is taken from Jones, 1999.

\(^3\)A Maori term used to describe people of European descent.
questions the underlying motives at the heart of calls for classroom dialogue. Jones also questions whether “togetherness” and dialogue-across-difference holds a compellingly positive meaning for marginalized or subordinate groups. She ponders if the “other” find it interesting and worthwhile to develop empathetic understanding of the powerful. This understanding is theoretically and implicitly demanded by dialogic encounters. What happens, she wonders, when the other refuses to join in classroom conversations designed to mutually empower multiple voices? Jones states that principles of benevolent or critical equality assumed as the norm by radical and liberal teachers and students are shaken when marginalized others desire separation and a space where they can be more fully present, rather than sharing.

In an effort to explore the limitations of the desire for dialogue, Jones and Jenkins undertook a study where they separated Maori and Pacific Islander students from their Pakeha classmates\textsuperscript{4} for three-quarters of an undergraduate class on feminist perspectives in education at Auckland University. Maori student feedback from previous Jones and Jenkins classes indicated that despite the instructors’ best efforts to maximize opportunities for all students to speak and be heard, the classes continued to be dominated by Pakeha words, assumptions, and interests. Jones and Jenkins saw this new arrangement to be in the best interest of a truly participatory and critical pedagogy.

Jones shares her observations and critique of what unfolded during the course, including a glimpse of the perspectives of members of the two groups. The instructors moved between the two groups. The Pakeha group grew frustrated at not being exposed to the Indigenous students’ perspectives and reactions to the readings. In contrast, the Maori

\textsuperscript{4} In this class the Pakeha group also included those of Asian backgrounds.
and Pacific Islander students flourished, enjoying a powerful and positive educational experience.

Jones (1999) argues that the call for dialogue, or “border crossing” as she terms it, is essentially a call for action by the dominant group; that is, it is a request by them to “grant a hearing” (Jones’s emphasis, p. 307) to the usually suppressed voice and realms of meaning of the subaltern. Subordinated peoples encounter the voice of the powerful and are immersed in it and hear it daily. Thus, the real exclusion is the dominant group’s exclusion from the voice of the marginalized, and the silence in the ears of the powerful is misrecognized as the silence of the subaltern. The Maori/Pacific Islander students did not miss the voice of the Pakeha, but the Pakeha students felt deprived by the absence of the Maori/Pacific Islander students.

Lather (1996, cited in Jones) also questions the wisdom of face-to-face conversations in classrooms, given the multiple accounts of minority students feeling silenced and disempowered in such settings. She suggests that members of the dominant group need to recognize that the embodied presence of the other is not required in order for ears that really hear to be developed. Latin American Jewish author Judith Moscovitch (1987) concurs, and places the onus on members of the dominant society to do their homework. She believes that lack of knowledge about other cultures is at the root of cultural oppression but “it is not the duty of the oppressed to educate the oppressor.” However, she is often called upon to be more than a resource person. Rather, she is expected to be an instructor, to teach everything she knows. As she points out, information about Latin Americans abounds in bookstores and libraries. “I say: read and listen. We may, then, have something to share” (1987, p. 84).

Elizabeth Ellsworth (1991) raises provocative issues in her article on cross-cultural
dialogue, an article that is based in part on her experiences as a “white” middle-class woman and professor engaged in developing an antiracist course with a diverse group of students. She takes issue with the notion of critical pedagogy as represented in her review of the literature. She finds critical pedagogy to be developed along highly abstract, utopian lines, far removed from the realities of everyday classroom experience. I concur, and suggest that Burbules and Rice (1991) and Giroux (1992) are just two examples of such abstract thinking and theorizing. Ellsworth suggests that by failing to theorize and analyze “rationalist assumptions,” critical pedagogues will continue to perpetuate relations of dominance in their classrooms. Pedagogues must recognize, she argues, that all “knowings are partial, that there are fundamental things each of us cannot know” (p.311) although these situations can be alleviated, in part, by the pooling of socially constructed knowledges.

The literature on critical pedagogy, Ellsworth states, must recognize issues of trust, risk and the operations of fear and desire around issues of identity and politics in the classroom, and it must recognize that dynamics of subordination are present among participants in any classroom; thus the marginalized are often not free to speak in their authentic voice. As well, she adds, the asymmetrical positions of difference between professor and students make it imperative that the goals of dialogue be articulated and agreed upon by all parties. Ellsworth recognizes the rationale of Martin and Mohanty’s (1986) call for the creation of new forms of collective struggle that do not rely on “the repressions and violence needed by dialogue based on and enforcing a harmony of interests” (Ellsworth, 1991, p.315). She elaborates Martin and Mohanty’s point by sharing an experience with

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5 The term ‘authentic’ is ambiguous and problematic. Smith (1999) points out that it has been deconstructed from psychoanalytic and poststructural feminist perspectives where it is assumed that we would find a ‘pure’ and authentic ‘self’ if we peel away “the oppressions and psychological consequences of oppression” (p.73).
classroom dialogue in her antiracist course.

While Ellsworth expected that she would be able to provide an atmosphere where all felt safe to speak and had an equal opportunity to do so, near the end of the term Ellsworth and her students recognized that focusing on such goals served only to divert their attentions from what needed to be done. That is, acting as though the classroom was a safe space in which democratic dialogue could take place did not make it so. Classroom practices were needed to confront the power dynamics inside and outside the classroom that made democratic dialogue impossible. From that point until the end of the semester students and teacher reflected on the group’s process—how they spoke to or silenced each other across their differences, how they divided labor, and how they made decisions.

Ellsworth concluded that her classroom was not a safe space for those experiencing oppression either inside or outside the class. Experiences of oppression included experiences of being gay, lesbian, fat, women of color working with men of color, “white” women working with men of color, and men of color working with “white” women and men. Some of the reasons given for concerns not being voiced included fear of being misunderstood, fear of disclosing too much and becoming too vulnerable, resentment that other oppressions were being marginalized in the name of addressing racism, confusions about levels of trust surrounding those who were allies to another group’s struggles, and resentment by some students of color that once again they were being asked to educate the oppressor. Participants in the class agreed that it was not enough to make a commitment to rational discussion about racism in a classroom setting. A safer space required high levels of trust and a personal commitment to individuals in the class. Social interactions outside the class where participants could come to know the histories, motivations and stakes of individuals in the
class begun early in the semester was offered as a starting point for building such an atmosphere.

Lisa Delpit (1988) took a different approach in her discussion of cross-cultural dialogue as she provided multiple vignettes of the frustrations experienced by Black and Native American educators and graduate students in their attempts to be heard on issues of curriculum development and pedagogy. Each vignette ends with such statements as “I’m not bothering with it anymore,” “Well, they don’t hear me,” or “It doesn’t make sense to keep talking to them” (p. 280-281). Delpit sees it as one of the tragedies of education that individuals being described in this manner are rarely aware that the dialogue has been silenced, and that such scenarios are enacted daily around the country. She decided to focus on why such communication blocks exist when both parties truly believe that their goals are the same. How might such barriers be broken down, she wondered. Her belief is that the answer lies in identifying and giving voice to alternate worldviews through ethnographic analysis, and that coming to understand the “silenced dialogue” may be realized through acknowledging what she calls the “culture of power” (p. 281).

Delpit proposed that issues of power are enacted in classrooms and that there are codes or rules for participating in power, codes that are a reflection of the culture of those who hold power. She further suggests that if you are not already a member of the powerful culture then you need to be told explicitly the rules that make acquiring power easier. Those who hold power are frequently least aware of the existence of power, or at least are unwilling to admit it. Delpit clarifies that when she speaks of codes she is referring to linguistic forms and communicative strategies that include ways of talking, writing, dressing and interacting. She further observes that information is transmitted implicitly within cultures; that is, to co-
members. However, when such means of communication are attempted in cross-cultural situations, confusion, misinterpretation, and frustration often occur. In her work in such areas as villages of Papua, New Guinea or Alaskan Native communities she has been grateful when an insider takes her aside to inform her of appropriate dress, protocols, taboo words, embedded meanings, and interactional styles. Delpit went on to make clear that she sees it as much the same for anyone seeking to learn the culture of power, and that time is needlessly wasted if one must learn them through "immersion." She added, though, that admitting participation in the culture of power, as suggested earlier, could be distinctly uncomfortable. Whether White educators (those who participated in her study) perceived themselves to have power over non-White speakers or not, by virtue of their numbers or position, they had the authority to determine what was "truth" regardless of the opinions of the people of color, who in contrast, were clearly cognizant of who held the power.

The focus that Delpit takes with respect to cross-cultural dialogue differs from that of other researchers reviewed thus far, given that her article delves fairly deeply into the terrain of skills versus process teaching approaches, direct versus indirect commands, and other differences between working-class and middle-class settings. She makes clear that it is essential to take into account issues of cultural and community context but is adamant that she is not advocating the passive adoption of an alternate code. Rather, students should be taught the value of the code they already possess while simultaneously understanding power realities. To not teach students of color and poor students the codes of power under the guise that to do so is to impose repressive powers of the elite, only serves to reinforce cultural hegemony. Other researchers, largely of color, emphasize the role of emotion in understanding each other in cross-cultural contexts.
The Role of Emotion in Understanding Ourselves and Others

Uma Narayan (1988) offers a refreshing perspective about dialoguing across difference. Unlike Burbules and Rice (1991), mentioned earlier, who approach the topic with a tone that is abstract in nature and, for the most part, largely theoretical, Narayan stresses the importance of emotion as it relates to understanding our societies and ourselves. In fact, she advocates that members of heterogeneous groups take the time to talk about how people can be damaged, intentionally or unintentionally, because the emotions and sense of self of the members of the oppressed group is violated by non-members of the oppressed group who participate in the dialogue. Narayan sees such self-examination as a pre-requisite for any group that has sincere intentions of working together across differences, rather than as a form of self-indulgence. Differences in background and identity can be enriching resources, epistemologically, politically, and personally, Narayan argues, and learning to understand and respect such differences has the potential to render more complex our understanding of ourselves and our societies, thereby enriching the range of connections we have with others.

In focusing on the role of the emotions Narayan follows strands of feminist theory that refute views that the emotions are nothing more than epiphenomenal baggage, insisting that they be taken seriously because of the positive contributions they may make to knowledge and communication. One way or the other, Narayan makes clear, we are forced to deal with our differences; we cannot get away from them. We may choose to ignore difference or work towards forming risky bonds of understanding while realizing the fragility of relationships that are being constructed across difference. As Narayan points out, good will in itself does not preclude bafflement and anger by failures of communication, no matter how strong the resolve to understand the experiences of more disadvantaged persons or
groups.

The feminist notion of "epistemic privilege," as Narayan explains it, claims that members of an oppressed group have a more immediate, subtle, and critical knowledge of their oppression than those who are not members of that particular group. They know how their oppression is experienced, the sometimes-subtle ways it is inflicted, and they have first hand knowledge of the ways that oppressive practices have defined the spaces where they live. For any explanation of a form of oppression to be legitimate, experiences and descriptions of how oppression is experienced by the oppressed must be taken into account, even if such accounts result in the explanatory paradigms of outsiders being shattered. The claim of "epistemic privilege" implies that people who are not members of the oppressed group must be prepared to work hard at coming to terms with the details of lived oppression. Narayan offers such examples as having members of the oppressed group as friends, participating in aspects of their lifestyle, resisting alongside them on issues of concern, and engaging in a sustained dialogue, as ways non-members may come to develop more sophisticated understanding of just what a form of oppression may involve (Narayan, 1988).

Hugh Vasquez (1995) concurs with Narayan and calls such individuals "allies," those people who are prepared to intervene to halt the mistreatment of others. He further clarifies that an act of alliance can take the form of a thought, feeling, or action, but insists that a key requirement of being an ally is an openness to hearing the stories from those who are mistreated, even if doing so evokes feelings of frustration, pain, or sadness.

Narayan is quick to make clear, in a manner similar to Moscovitch (1987), that she is not suggesting that it is the responsibility of the oppressed to educate concerned outsiders. Rather, outsiders must be prepared to listen to or read about the experiences of the oppressed;
they have a responsibility to actively seek out and acquire such knowledge. To hold the thesis that insiders have epistemic privilege also implies that outsiders must undertake or attempt what Narayan terms “methodological humility” and “methodological caution.” The outsider must always hold open the possibility that she may be missing something and perceptions that the insider has made a mistake must be put on hold until such time as a fuller understanding of the context has been probed. Methodological caution requires the outsider to attempt to criticize an insider's perceptions delicately, and to avoid denigrating or dismissing entirely the insider's point of view or emotional response. To accept the notion of epistemic privilege is to acknowledge that insiders are in a position to articulate their own interests better than outsiders, while simultaneously recognizing that all knowledge is partial.

An insider's emotional responses to lived oppression, Narayan suggests, may enrich her knowledge of the nature of that oppression in ways not likely for an outsider in at least three ways. First, she believes that while sympathetic outsiders can and do react intellectually and emotionally to incidents of racism or sexism despite never having been the targets themselves, there is a tendency on the part of the outsider to not fully grasp the complexity of the insiders’ emotional response, and that failure may in turn contribute to sketchy understanding of the emotional costs of the oppression to the insider.

Narayan points out that it may not be unusual for the insider to experience a complex and jumbled array of emotions in dialogic encounters that involve outsiders. Emotions may range from anger at the perpetrator, a deep sense of humiliation, momentary hatred directed toward the whole group, outrage at a history that created and sustains such attitudes, shame at one’s powerlessness to effect change, and at once a strong sense of solidarity with those who have a shared history. While the sympathetic outsider is likely to feel anger toward the
perpetrator when she is privy to a racist or sexist incident, she may be unable to fully grasp
its effect on its victims. Having not ever been on the receiving end of such oppression, the
sympathetic outsider cannot, therefore, do full justice to the costs of the incident.

Second, an outsider is likely to see the commonplace manifestations of oppression; for example, if a professor directs racist comments at minority students a sympathetic outsider will see it in much the same way as the victims of the attitude. But outsiders may fail to see what is going on if the professor's attitudes are expressed in more subtle, covert ways that may include dismissal of their queries, under-valuing their work, or lack of cordiality. Narayan elaborates this point convincingly and with insight, I think, in her shared awareness that an insider who is sensitized to such prejudiced attitudes will quickly be alerted to cues, whether they be facial expressions, body language, or an intuitive unease about a person or situation, that an outsider may fail to notice. The insider knows first hand the extent to which a particular form of oppression permeates a society, how it affects the lives of its victims, and the subtle forms in which it can be manifested.

Third, Narayan argues that outsiders are less able or likely to make connections between what they know about oppression from one context to the next. Or, they may fail to connect what they know theoretically with what is taking place in a particular situation. If men, for example, have been sensitized to the silencing of women in public or professional situations, they may still be far less likely to notice the phenomenon in private or social gatherings. The more insiders are exposed to oppression, on the other hand, the more they are likely to carry over what they have learned about oppression to new contexts.

Young's (1997) concept of asymmetrical reciprocity supports Narayan's (1988) views that insiders have knowledge of lived oppression that is unlikely for an outsider to
fully grasp. She recognizes that participants in a communication situation are each distinguished by a particular history and social position that renders their relationship asymmetrical. It is possible, she argues, for people to understand each other across difference through dialogue without the requirement that they can reverse perspectives or identify with each other. In fact, she is adamant in her view that it is not possible or morally desirable to adopt another person's standpoint in order to engage in moral interactions.

Rather than viewing emotions as inimical to the construction of knowledge, Jaggar (1989) sees emotions as helpful, perhaps even necessary to the task of bridging the gap across difference. She argues that we actively engage and construct the world through our emotional responses that have both physical and mental aspects, each of which complements the other. "Outlaw emotions" (p.161) as Jaggar terms them, may enable us to perceive the world differently from the way it is framed in conventional descriptions. Embracing these "conventionally inexplicable emotions" (p. 161) may pave the way for making subversive observations and rethinking taken for granted assumptions that have historically obscured the reality of marginalized people. Alternative epistemological models demonstrate, Jaggar argues, how our conceptualization of the world changes as our emotional responses to it change. In turn, new insights are stimulated. That is, changes to the outer world begin with each of us and our relation to the world.

The forms that the oppressions take may run the gamut from seemingly trivial daily manifestations to life-threatening acts. Accordingly, the outsider does not pay or cannot truly know the heavy psychological and social price the insider pays. The project of insiders working together alongside outsiders is laden with difficulty. It cannot be otherwise when
the two groups are not equally vulnerable. Yet, outsiders often react with bafflement, anger or hurt when an insider is offended and responds angrily or pointedly to their sometimes clumsy or insensitive words or deeds. Issues of oppression are never purely theoretical to an insider and their emotional reactions to what they are expected to put up with become exacerbated when well-intentioned outsiders seem unable to grasp their perspective. The outcome is that in some cases the response of the outsider tramples on the self-identity, self-worth, or self-respect of the insider; at other times the insider's sense of identity and solidarity with and respect for her group is trampled on. Denial of the validity of the insider's response, accusations of paranoia, failure by outsiders to avoid stereotypic generalizations about insiders, and inappropriate judgments about what insiders ought to do or feel, are other ways outsiders can be insensitive to the reactions of insiders.

Narayan believes that both insiders and outsiders must take the idea of epistemic privilege of the oppressed seriously if the problems of communicating across difference are to be made easier to handle. If and when outsiders become aware of the features that impinge on dialogue with insiders, they will be more likely to proceed with methodological humility and caution; they will likely be more conscious of the implications of what they say and how they say it. Insiders can support such a process by realizing that outsiders do not have the subtle understanding of oppression that they do. That realization may help insiders deal with insensitivity with greater charity and allow them to see outsiders as less culpable. Narayan acknowledges that the conditions she recommends for communicating across difference more effectively are not easy for insiders or outsiders. She does see it as essential, though, that such groups address the question of communication programmatically and “not just act on the hope that goodwill on the part of its members will take care of all
such problems” (1988, p.47). The role of minority instructors discussed in the next section is another significant consideration in facilitating communication across difference in the academy.

**Exploding the Silences, Opening Up Institutions: Minority Instructors in the Academy**

I was going to die, if not sooner or later, whether or not I had ever spoken myself. My silences had not protected me. Your silence will not protect you.  
(Audre Lorde, 1984, p. 41)

The video “Shattering the Silences,” (1996) points out that, until little more than thirty years ago, universities have traditionally been exclusive places where minority people were largely kept out. Opening up institutions has been challenging for those who have dared to demand that silenced voices be heard. In this section I review the literature on varying experiences of scholars who are outsiders in the academy, and, in particular, experiences of those scholars working in cross-cultural contexts.

Native American scholar Sandy Grande (2000), for example, agrees with Ellsworth (1991) about the abstract, utopian nature of the notion of critical pedagogy. She further asserts that the deep structures of critical pedagogy fail to consider an Indigenous perspective, often indiscriminately employing critical theories to explain the sociopolitical conditions of all marginalized peoples. Grande makes clear that she is not suggesting that critical pedagogy is irrelevant to Indigenous peoples, but rather that it does not recognize Indigenous peoples as unique, and in many ways incomparable to other minority groups, because, for one example, they are an involuntary minority group; that is they have been displaced in their own homeland. Most Native American scholars, Grande states, feel compelled to address the political urgencies of their own communities and view engagement in abstract theory as “a luxury and privilege of the academic elite” (2000, p. 468). Implied in
her article is that concerns about effective and genuine cross-cultural dialogue are not a priority for Native American scholars at this juncture. Rather, Grande calls for the development of what she terms a new “Red Pedagogy,” one that is grounded in American intellectualism, focused on sovereignty and self-determination, and inspired by Native American spiritual traditions. According to Grande, the “pedagogical” is about identity production, where the formation of self provides the basis of analyses of race, class, gender, and sexuality and of their relationship to issues of community, democracy, and justice. The responses of the Maori and Pacific Island students to being separated from their Pakeha classmates in Jone’s (1999) study suggest that they too preferred to focus on Indigenous issues and perspectives among themselves, at least as a part of their studies.

S. Nombuso Dlamini (2002) addresses the complexities inherent in the classroom application of critical pedagogy and antiracism education from the perspective of a Black woman teacher-educator in a predominantly white institution. While a PhD student, Dlamini had the opportunity to take a course entitled “Postcolonial Literature” with Henry Giroux and Roger Simon, two well-known critical pedagogues. She was excited at the opportunity, eager to see if Giroux’s and Simon’s pedagogical approach exemplified what they describe in their works. That is, would they practice what they preach? The experience proved to heighten Dlamini’s awareness of the complexities of applying critical pedagogy in the classroom. The course package offered works from a wide range of scholars whose works challenged the canon. Not surprisingly the class was comprised of students from a wide range of ethnic backgrounds. The format of the seminars included several students assigned each week to open the class with reaction papers on prescribed readings, followed by class discussion led by those students. Such an approach not only gave voice to students’
interpretations of the readings, but also provided opportunity for others to interrogate interpretations, an approach that is a pillar of critical pedagogy. The role of the professors was to facilitate discussion, making sure all voices were heard and respected.

Dlamini recalls how she was assigned, along with two white Canadian women, to read a Franz Fanon (1989) article that depicted Black women’s envy of white men and the obsession of white women with Black men. The two white women expressed anger at the depiction and at the language Fanon used, describing it as a stereotypical and insulting way of writing about ‘others.’ Heated exchanges ensued and climaxed when an African-Canadian man challenged the women to examine the article in its historical context, and to examine the racist implications of their responses. A long period of silence followed before the man, singed by the highly tense atmosphere, fled the room. Dlamini’s input, on the other hand, was completely ignored. Subsequent classes unfolded in a similar way with tensions increasing by the day. Despite the course title “Postcolonial Literature” Dlamini felt that white Canadian students did not come to the class prepared to hear marginal voices, whether in text form or in person. If a student dared to speak critically of Eurocentric knowledge, to challenge the canon, they were seen as ‘troublemakers.’ Many white students assumed that they represented the oppressors in the readings and Indigenous or African Canadian students saw themselves as representing the oppressed. Dlamini retreated into silence, yet felt bitter about being placed in that situation. It was her view that Giroux and Simon, in their concern for their progressive white educator image, let the class down by refusing to intervene when students exhibited racist and sexist attitudes, projecting the illusion that anything goes and all is relevant in a liberal classroom.
I have continued to think about Dlamini’s experience in relation to my own teaching practices and to my ongoing readings. I return to Narayan (1988), who advocated that groups with heterogeneous components take the time to talk about how people can be damaged, intentionally or unintentionally, because non-members in such contexts violate the emotions and sense of self of the members of the oppressed group. While I agree that such self-examination is important for working together across differences I think it essential that instructors take the lead in disrupting one-sided discussions and allow that there may be opposing views, rather than assuming that marginalized students should take the risk of being the first to talk back, at least until the students feel the climate is safer for them to do so. Differences in background and identity can be enriching resources, epistemologically, politically, and personally.

Since becoming a faculty member herself Dlamini recognizes the complexities of the teacher’s position, especially when minority teachers attempt to teach against the grain, to challenge existing modes of learning and teaching. The challenges, she makes clear, are significantly different from those faced by mainstream educators. To grant voices in the classroom equal opportunity of expression is to imply that varying critical ways of knowing and learning will be validated. Such sharing of power is complicated, Dlamini argues, when working with students who have traditionally held positions of power, especially when existing power relations are challenged. She contends that while students are often willing to examine issues of gender, class, and sexuality inequalities, there is reticence to examine race-based inequalities.
Students readily recognize themselves as white by description\(^6\); however, privileges that are inherent in this description are either not acknowledged or not understood. Rather, states Dlamini, it is common for students to either lay claim to their own marginality, or to deny outright the existence of racism in Canada. At best, issues of race are relegated to the sidelines and “white” issues reclaim center court, or worse, some students react with hostility, resentment, and anger, offended by the perception that all “whites” are being painted with the same brush. As the term progresses cliques are formed and identified by patterns of communication or along ideological lines. Minority instructors, then, are subjected to such comments as “we hope you don’t take this personally,” and “we were wondering whether this is your personal experience” (Dlamini, 2002, p.60) when racial issues are raised prompting feelings of anger toward the professor, implying the professor’s personal involvement in the issue.

Giroux (1992) argues that a politics of difference must move beyond merely celebrating specific forms of difference to address the struggle for equality and justice in everyday life including the refusal to embrace a hierarchy of struggles. Only then does it become possible for critical educators to take up notions of community where voice, particularity and difference legitimately provide the foundations for democracy, thereby enabling students to rewrite difference by crossing cultural borders. Within such borderlands narratives and experiences become the tools students use to rethink the relationship not only between the margins and center of power, but also between themselves and others. Giroux believes that the creation of such spaces allows for participants to better understand the

\(^6\) Dlamini articulates that the concept of whiteness is socially constructed, bearing three layers of meaning. These include skin color, whiteness as a state of being (e.g. lived experiences that include unearned privileges) and whiteness as an ideology (i.e. maintenance of power by virtue of particular beliefs, policies and practices.)
fragile nature of the identities that are being transformed within such borderlands.

The cultural remapping, or border pedagogy, proposed by Giroux is problematic for Dlamini. As she points out, it is folly to assume that students will willingly engage in cultural border crossing and learn different ways of thinking about the world simply because you ask them to do so. In her experience, that has not happened. Instead of crossing borders students have tended to defend their territories and suggest that readings and other course material are biased against white students. Not only has her authority been challenged but also decisions about classroom discourse and course readings are challenged. As Dlamini sees it, Giroux’s notion of border pedagogy breaks down because instructors fail “to examine ways in which the creation of critical pedagogy classroom conditions can result in a further marginalization of the very discourses it aims to elevate” (p.64).

In returning to the context of the Giroux and Simon class discussed earlier, as Dlamini describes it, the instructors did not engage in border pedagogy successfully – they did not give voice to student interpretations, and minority voices were not heeded. Instead, the outcome was further marginalization and silencing for the Black man in the class who dared to challenge the dominant voices, and silencing for Dlamini herself. For her, then, border crossing must also be about challenging the belief systems that are a part of everyday living; that is, challenging ways of living including the territories and practices all are invested in. It must be about opening up spaces for all to be heard, and for the dominant voices to come to understand the colonialist legacies that prompt their emotional, defensive responses.
Summary

As I suggested earlier, the notion of cross-cultural dialogue is problematic for First Nations peoples because it fails to consider our unequal position in contemporary society. As the research participant (Liz) stated in the quote at the beginning of this dissertation, the expression “cross-cultural dialogue” implies that there is social equality between cultures, and clearly that does not exist. Jones (1999) approached the issue by examining the motives for classroom dialogue, arguing that the embodied presence of the marginalized should not be required for members of the dominant society to gain knowledge and greater understanding of other worldviews; it is up to them to do their own homework. Accordingly she and her colleague chose to separate Indigenous students from members of the dominant society. While I agree that beckoning minority students with pleas of “tell us your story” is unacceptable and tiresome for First Nations students in particular, I argue that the action of separating students without tackling the issue of more effective communication falls far short of bridging the gap between cultures.

Many scholars take issue with critical pedagogy for a range of reasons, many of which I support as sound. It is too abstract and removed from the classroom. Too often so-called critical pedagogues fail to take into account the dynamics of subordination at play and the asymmetrical positions of difference that Young (1997) alluded to, and, as Grande (1999) pointed out, critical pedagogy fails to recognize the unique position of Indigenous peoples. Recommendations offered by scholars who take issue with critical pedagogy (for example, Ellsworth, 1991 and Dlamini, 2002) including the requirement of a personal commitment to individuals in the class; planning social engagements outside of class where students may come to know each other’s histories and motivations; confronting power dynamics in the
classroom through regular, consistent, reflective discourses on important incidents and processes; and setting a tone of openness and respect for differing perspectives at least offer a starting point to effect positive change. Narayan (1988) approaches the notion of working together across differences differently. She places the onus on individuals insisting that we engage in self-examination practices, and urges us to see differences as enriching resources on an epistemological, political and personal level. Acknowledging epistemic privilege not only means that outsiders accept that they do not have the subtle understanding of oppression that insiders do, it also suggests that insiders deal with insensitivity on the part of outsiders with greater patience. Narayan’s perspectives move closer to the notion of bridge building that I discuss later, unlike Giroux’s (1992) perspective.

Giroux’s (1992) argument that we must move beyond a politics of difference that focuses on celebrating difference seems sound at first glance. But I wonder - What do the phrases ‘struggling for equality and justice’, ‘refusing to embrace hierarchies’, ‘providing the foundations for democracy’, and ‘crossing cultural borders through sharing of borderland narratives and experiences’ really mean? And, how is this argument significantly different than discourses about cross-cultural dialogue? In order for students to truly rethink the relationship between the margins and center of power and between themselves and others they need more than rhetoric. They need more than tools. They need to learn how to use those tools. There are subtle differences between the notions of cross-cultural dialogue and bridge building that move beyond the approaches and arguments put forth by Dlamini and others. I develop that argument more fully in a later section.
The Role of Cohorts for Post Secondary Students

Introduction

The term "cohort" is commonly used to suggest a group organized by a university, usually for an extended period of time, where all or at least some of the courses are taken together. Clearly, this is just one manifestation of the term cohort. In a recent presentation, Graham Smith discussed another manifestation of the term "cohort" in New Zealand. Maori graduate students enrolled in universities located throughout New Zealand meet at Auckland University once per month with Maori faculty from various universities to discuss and problem solve issues relevant to the students. One objective is the formation of networks among students and faculty, which will have a positive impact on retention and the larger goal of reaching a critical mass of highly skilled Maori PhD's.

In this section I review the literature on cohorts for post secondary students in mainstream contexts and in Indigenous contexts, highlighting, in particular, articulated goals or objectives, and findings. I argue that those goals must include a focus on coalition work and bridge building in order to avoid the perpetuation of insular attitudes that may stifle rather than promote intellectual, emotional, and spiritual growth. That follows Reagon's (1983) assertion, that it is in our best interests to engage in the business of building bridges and crossing cultural borders, and recognizes that there are no safe spaces to hide and be with other people who are just like you.

Cohorts in Mainstream Contexts

Dyson and Hanley (2002) conducted a study to examine the effect of cohort grouping on student social adjustment and academic performance in a teacher education program.

7 "Connecting Indigenous Academic Work to Practical Outcomes: Confronting the Academy and Community Divide", November, 2002, University of British Columbia
Group participants, all of whom were in the first year of their teacher education program, were divided into two groups, the open cohort and non-cohort groups. The cohort group took five required courses together. The instructors for both groups (cohort and non-cohort) worked independently in the delivery of the courses. They did not collaborate to discuss content, pedagogical approaches used, or the like. Members of the non-cohort group selected their own courses and only took courses with other members of the group by chance.

Interviews were conducted with and assessments administered to both groups at the beginning and end of the first year in the faculty. Interesting changes took place during the course of the year. Where members of the cohort group initially tended to view the relationships formed in the group very positively in terms of mutual supportiveness and inclusiveness, by the end, negative relationships had begun to surface. Peer relationships broke down, irritations with each other were common, and for many the negative atmosphere among the group made it difficult to go to class. In contrast, while cooler, more tentative relationships were first reported by members of the non-cohort group, more positive, fulfilling, enthusiastic peer relationships had formed by post-test. Interestingly, there were no differences over time in self-efficacy, personal social support, or adjustment to university life. Of surprise to the researchers was that the non-cohort group gained more than the cohort group in academic performance with a gain of 1 standard deviation. Dyson and Hanley suggest that the negative social relationships that developed over time may have contributed to the lesser academic gain, a factor that I think must be considered.

The results of the study Dyson and Hanley conducted suggest that an open cohort model may have no benefit over a non-cohort model if enhanced academic performance is a major goal. With respect to the impact of social support, Dyson and Hanley acknowledge,
the existence of networks outside the classroom to compensate for those experienced in their classes is unknown. They argue that a more vigorous research design is necessary to restrict responses to only the immediate context of the classroom in order for the data from each context to focus on and examine the effect of cohort grouping. Further, this study did not test a closed model. The results, then, have no applicability beyond the open cohort model. An expanded sample, Dyson and Hanley state, where group members not only take all courses together, but also engage in cooperative learning, might provide a more useful evaluation of the cohort model as an instructional delivery format.

Teitel (1997) engaged with master’s and doctoral students and faculty in an action research project at the University of Massachusetts at Boston (UMB) where all of the school leadership programs have shifted to a cohort model. The doctoral program was a closed cohort where students took all required courses together with no one else in the class. The master’s program was more open as a handful of students who were non-cohort members joined some classes in order to complete individual program requirements. Both cohorts were evenly balanced along gender lines. Approximately one-half of the 12 doctoral students and one-third of the 20 master’s students were of color.

The university embraced a cohort model for its school leadership programs in order to increase the likelihood of bonds forming between students as they traveled together toward their degrees, and in an effort to increase retention. Another purpose was to build networks that would be mutually beneficial to students and enable them to become agents of change in the schools and school systems in which they worked. Teitel acknowledges that the cohort approach abounds with both challenges and opportunities as program developers model the development of learning communities and students are presented with opportunities to
explore their own leadership.

In what Teitel terms a “taking stock” process that the faculty and students in the leadership programs were committed to, all participants completed surveys designed to reflect on the positives and negatives of the cohort design. They also participated in many discussions concerning the impacts of cohort membership among students, between students and faculty, and within the faculty. The plan for this action research project was twofold. One was to act as an internal document that became a springboard for further formal and informal discussions throughout the duration of the program, at cohort meetings and retreats. Second, by viewing this study as a “work in progress,” it could be used to inform the use of cohorts in other educational leadership programs (1997, p.67).

What Teitel (1997) and his team observed was that bonding led to impacts that had not been anticipated. These included, for example, interpersonal conflicts, formation of cliques, deeper discussion of sensitive issues including issues of race, and the realization by students that they could get cast into roles within the cohort that became difficult if not impossible to change once set. Although many students reported the benefits of networking, connection and mutual support, which appear to have contributed to higher retention of students, other concerns were also raised. These included the long-term impact of a negative person on group dynamics, concern about weak members plaguing the class particularly during group projects, and a sentiment of being “stuck.” Being stuck either meant becoming an outcast because of having strong views that went against the grain of the class, or of not being challenged intellectually. Additionally, they found that the power relationships between students and faculty changed, which ultimately led to the revamping of program development and the decision making process that included, for example, negotiating the
sylabus and adjusting activities to better consider the needs of students.

The recommendations offered by the Teitel project included, among others, the need for clear goals and expectations to be articulated as cohort programs are being developed and (re)shaped, the provision of time for informal, social connections among students, the inclusion of content on important sensitive topics in course syllabi and use of strategies to solicit deeper responses, collaboration and communication among involved faculty members about all aspects of the program, and clarity about how cohort conflicts should be resolved. All of these recommendations have particular relevance and applicability to the contexts of my research. I address them more fully in later chapters as I discuss issues raised by research participants and summarize the findings.

An examination of the cultures of elementary pre-service teacher education cohorts at a southern United States university conducted by M. Radencich, T. Thompson, N. Anderson, K. Oropallo, P. Fleege, M. Harrison, and P. Hanley (1998) using qualitative analyses yielded both positive and negative elements of team cultures. The authors use the terms “teams” and “cohorts” interchangeably throughout the paper, explaining that some U.S. colleges of education organize instruction through teams or cohorts. Students remain together with the same advisor for several semesters. The assumption is that positive academic and social gains result from the continuity and mutual support of such a plan. The authors make it clear from the outset that they are skeptical about that assumption given the limited supporting data from the few studies that have been conducted.

In the Radencich et al study, various teams were examined. The student population is 90% Caucasian and one-quarter to one-third at any given time are over the age of 22 years. Teams are comprised of 25-40 students who remain together through their junior year,
summer session, and the first semester of their senior year. Some students take classes with several teams and are members of none in order to accommodate work or childcare commitments.

The study involved the formation of two faculty and two student focus groups with each group interviewed at the beginning and end of the spring semester. These interviews were the primary means of gathering information although additional data were collected through survey/response writings and email messages. An interview guide was used and participants engaged in discussion of questions that emerged in each session. Topics that emerged multiple times either in student or faculty sessions were highlighted to build a database.

Several influences emerged that mediated between the team and individual students' personalities, worldviews, and experiences. They included the family-like context of team, the otherness of those not members of a particular team or who were perceived as different, formation of cliques, group pressure to conform to the wishes of vocal group members, team impact on academic performance, and the response of team members to individual professors and team supervisors.

The researchers found much congruence between perspectives of team supervisors, other faculty, and the students about the moral conscience and caring of members as they dealt with issues related to team support, scapegoating of each other or professors, cliquishness, cooperative assignments and faculty evaluations. While there was much support for the concept of teams they found much need for team supervisors to engage in problem solving to avoid rifts in team culture. Another concern was about team members becoming so inwardly focused that they fail to notice or minimize issues outside the context
of their group, including professors and non-team members.

As the authors point out, teachers are expected to develop atmospheres in schools that are accepting, risk-free, and inclusive, and where diversity is seen as an enriching team building component. They observed team cliquishness and lack of inclusion at levels that were a cause of concern. Although most students showed no desire to give up their teams, and despite the many negative reactions, it was noted that some students chose to withdraw from their team because of dissatisfaction with it. Clearly, they posit, there may be a need to keep the team experience, but ways must be found to improve it. Team building activities undertaken amidst group members must be geared to enhancing trust and caring. Team goals must be articulated early and be designed to facilitate students being able to see the viewpoint of others, and social contexts must be factored in to help develop these goals, and reflect on them on a frequent, ongoing basis.

**Cohorts in Indigenous Contexts**

Heimbecker, Minner and Prater ((2000) examined two programs serving Navajo and Nishnabe students respectively, and focuses on recruitment and retention of minority teachers into the teaching profession, as well as other significant features of the programs. I will describe each program briefly, and then discuss aspects of the paper that have relevance to my research.

An important goal of the Reaching American Indian Special/Elementary Educators (RAISE) program located on the Navajo Indian Reservation in Arizona is the retention of special education teachers working there given their very high turnover rate each year. Few special education programs prepare teachers to work in rural and remote areas, in particular on American Indian reserves. The RAISE program increases the likelihood of developing
teachers who will spend their careers teaching Navajo students by providing experiential learning and field-based training where students are immersed in Navajo culture. Navajo paraprofessionals are among recruits who are already enrolled in the Northern Arizona University teacher education program, most of whom are already employed by the local school district. Students are required to write an essay explaining why they wish to participate in the program. About half of the cohort members are from the Kayenta reservation, and typically, are married, thirty-year-old Navajo women with several children, whose first language is Navajo. The other half of the cohort is comprised of non-Indian women, generally in their early twenties who are following the more traditional direct path to an undergraduate degree and teacher certification. A grant from the Department of Education’s Office of Rehabilitation Services covers program delivery, student fees and books, and professional development costs for the year and a half long program.

Cohort members participate in orientation sessions designed with several purposes in mind. Native American faculty and students make presentations to other students to share information about Native American culture, and to make students aware of issues that may arise through the course of the year. Hopi, Navajo, and Anglo cultures are all discussed. Indian students act as advisors to Anglo students who often have limited experience with Native American traditions, offering first hand experience with such events as Navajo weddings and ceremonies. Students are asked to consider the importance of cultural sensitivity toward the students they are teaching.

As members of the cohort, students meet every weekday and are encouraged to work cooperatively on class assignments. Support for each other goes beyond the classroom to include such things as carpooling and help with daycare. The curriculum is highly
contextualized and relevant, and there are "special efforts to engage students in the profession of education" (Heimbecker et al, 2000:37) that include collaborative research, writing, and presenting papers at regional conferences.

Survey data indicated that many students enrolled in the RAISE program felt they benefited greatly as a result of not having to relocate families, a factor that no doubt contributed to 100% retention rate between 1992 and 1996. Further, some Native Americans noted that they grew from viewing the Anglo culture through a different lens than how they had been taught.

The second program examined by Heimbecker et al. (2000) focuses on the Sioux Lookout District Native Teacher Education program (NTEP) offered by Lakehead University (LU) in Thunder Bay, Ontario. The goal of the program was to ensure that the teacher education program would meet the needs of the District’s First Nations peoples. The two-year program provided courses geared to train teachers to deliver a bilingual/bicultural program. Many had classroom experience and were working or volunteering in a school. Those who had teaching responsibilities were released with pay to attend classes and the student teaching practicum.

The Nishnabe Nation Education Council covered student tuition and instructor travel expenses. Students were required to meet the joint selection criteria of the Sioux Lookout NTEP Joint Management Committee and LU, which included a requirement that candidates be mature Native people fluent in a Native language with classroom experience. Candidates without a high school diploma, but with relevant life experience, were considered. Assessments were carried out to determine candidates’ ability to handle coursework; those not adequately prepared were encouraged to enroll in upgrading courses before reapplying.
While students enrolled in the four-year B.A./B.Ed. Program at LU typically took the teacher education component of their program after completion of their arts courses, the pattern was reversed for NTEP students. Approximately two-thirds of the coursework was completed in each student's home community through the Wahsa Distance Education network, with student/faculty interaction supplemented via simulcast radio. The remaining third of coursework was delivered at LU's main campus and the Pelican Falls Education Center.

There were many reasons cited by students to explain the dropout issue (which was at a rate of 27%) including feelings of guilt for neglecting their families and work, loneliness during on-campus coursework, lack of sufficient feedback, insufficient time to complete assignments, poor time management skills, and unresolved personal problems, to name a few. One response to these issues was the implementation of a mentor program. Given the success of the RAISE program, which emphasized cooperation and collaboration, the building of a "family-like" mutually supportive community, and on-going program evaluation, one wonders how such emphases might have affected the outcome in the LU program examined.

Students registered in Australia's James Cook University's Remote Area Teacher Education Program (RATEP) reviewed by York (2001) studied the same courses with the same lectures as their on-campus counterparts, but did so via specially developed Interactive Multimedia Courseware (IMM), the Internet, on-site tutors, teleconferences, textbooks and videos. As York pointed out, large on-campus urban institutions have traditionally militated against tertiary success for Indigenous students who maintain traditional customs, live in small remote communities, and have limited experience with the outside world. Given that Indigenous students from such communities rely heavily on family, kinship groups, and
community networks for support while maintaining strong reciprocal kinship responsibilities, it is not surprising that dropout rates at on-campus sites have traditionally been very high. Alex Ling (1999), a graduate student at James Cook University and former RATEP student, emphasized how studying in one’s community surrounded by family not only enables success but also keeps Indigenous students culturally strong. This program removes a major impediment to Indigenous peoples’ academic progress.

The RATEP program was conceived in an effort to redress multiple issues including geographic remoteness, racial discrimination, educational marginalization, and linguistic plurality. It was driven by concepts of social justice and culturally contextualized education using information technologies. York suggests that components such as the mode of delivery, multi-systemic collaboration, and multiple cultural contextualization have all been major factors to which increased graduation rates and student satisfaction may be attributed.

The mode of delivery is the primary difference between RATEP and the on-campus model. The IMM courseware package is used to deliver all subjects and has been proven to be successful and culturally appropriate for Indigenous students because of its hands-on and visual stimulus components. The intensive teleconferencing schedule extends well beyond the trouble-shooting and administrative purposes common to distance programs. Teleconferences are used for tutorials, problem-solving discussions, student-led seminars, and guest speaker input. In courses where RATEP and on-campus students are combined, the teleconferences have proven effective in aiding understanding of cross-cultural perceptions of various theoretical, curriculum, and pedagogic issues. Students at various sites communicate with each other and with instructors on an ongoing basis. Instructors are cognizant of Indigenous modes of learning and facilitate meshing those modes with those
promoted in academia. In effect, there is a three-way conversation between Indigenous, non-Indigenous, and Western academic cultures. The delivery partnership includes James Cook University, the far Tropical North Queensland Institute of Technical and Further Education, the Queensland State Education Department, and Indigenous communities throughout mainland Queensland and the Torres Strait.

Regarding cultural contextualization, instructors no longer only take Western "cultural capital" into consideration, but consciously try to incorporate into their courseware the knowledge and ways of knowing that Aboriginal students bring with them. It is essential that the specific requirements of an academic culture expressed through the content taught and assessed, and the Western means of promoting cognitive development, be accommodated in RATEP. Further, RATEP lecturers have had to incorporate into their curriculum design features that provide students with the tools to match cultural and individual ways of learning with academic learning tasks. However, it is clear to the students that they are immersed in a reciprocal relationship with their instructors, where each may learn from the other. In this way the cross-cultural process of teaching and learning becomes a two-way exchange where all benefit. Instructors, on the other hand, acknowledge the difficulty and discomfort of moving from their traditional pedagogical parameters.

Not only has this program resulted in a graduation rate of 82% in its nine years of operation, which must be celebrated, the attitudinal changes with respect to the perspectives of "partners" within universities must also be highlighted. The importance of community input, varying worldviews, pedagogical approach and how "well developed support systems" are defined, as they relate to developing Indigenous education programs cannot be minimized. The graduation rate, York argues, is better than any other affirmative action
program, national or international.

Summary

All of the studies that I have reviewed on cohorts offer informative findings and valuable contributions to the literature on cohorts, albeit some more pertinent than others to this research. Certainly the focus and goals vary a great deal. A common purpose was the building of networks and support systems where, most particularly in Indigenous contexts, a major goal was for students to become agents of change. Importantly, in the Teitel (1997) study the initial internal report was viewed as a springboard for further discussions throughout the duration of the program. In that regard the program was seen as a work in progress (a practice all cohort programs would benefit from following) rather than as a one-shot research project. Resolution of internal conflicts, issues of students being cast in roles and the like might then be addressed by instructors or program coordinators before they escalate beyond control. A number of significant issues, concerns and recommendations arose in several studies, as they did in this research, including, for example, the need for goals and expectations to be articulated early in the program and revisited throughout the duration of the cohort, and facilitation of students being better able to see the viewpoints of others.

In the Heimbecker et al (2000) community-based study, Indigenous students had the opportunity to act as advisors to non-native students, sharing with them aspects of their lived experiences, rituals and traditions. The researchers reported that cohort participants were encouraged to work collaboratively on assignments and provide support to each other beyond the cohort, all of which no doubt contributed to the increase in graduation rates. One additional outcome for participants was a more positive attitude toward Anglo culture,
although this was a one-way, non-reciprocal approach.

With the exception of York (2001) who briefly addressed the issue, the topic of cross-cultural communication was not an area of focus. None focused on life beyond the cohort or viewed cohorts as a site for coalition work or bridge building within the cohort and beyond in mainstream contexts. This work, I argue, ought to be an important focus of cohort membership.

Coalition Work, Building Bridges

Introduction

Cohorts are not necessarily disparate entities. Rather, I argue that cohorts ought to be sites for intragroup coalition work among First Nations students. They must also prepare these students for intergroup encounters. In this section I first define coalitions as I use the term for the purposes of this dissertation. Next, I will discuss the purposes and principles of coalitions from the perspective of various scholars, including several strategies for coalition building that render abstract notions more accessible. Several cautionary notes about risks of engaging in coalition work are offered as well. I will then clarify the relationship between intra and intergroup coalitions and, conclude by creating a link between coalition work and cultural border crossing or bridge building.

Exploring Coalition Politics

Burack (2004) defines coalitions as the "joint activity of autonomous groups, either for a single purpose or to pursue long-term social, economic, or political goals" (p.150-1). As she points out, some feminists consider groups with short-term goals to be coalitions and those of a more long-term nature to be alliances. Burack does not make such distinctions but
acknowledges that there may be circumstances where they may apply. I find the term “coalition” to be more suited to the university settings where my research is focused.

Regardless of which term we use, Watts (1996) states that we must always be clear about what the criteria are for doing coalition work and about what constitutes doing coalition work. He argues that the term is too broad to be of any analytical utility if it is used to describe any configuration of different people who are mobilized behind a particular individual or issue. We must be conceptually precise. Reagon (1983) lays out what she calls the principles of coalition, emphasizing that you do not go into coalition work because it is comfortable or because you like it, you go in because it is necessary. Gone are the days (if they ever existed) when we can expect to live in isolation and be with people who are just like us. She acknowledges that because of the challenges of being in mainstream society all the time, there is the desire to bar the door, to form a unified front where all who are like you may survive and thrive. In these insular environments, though, there are no opportunities to learn about and take into account the voices, experiences, and perspectives of those who are not like you; there is a tendency to get too comfortable in the barred room. Reagon argues, justifiably, that no coalition building is done in such an environment; it does not provide a space for members to develop the ability to cope when non-members enter the room. Coalition work is not done in the home; it must be done in the streets. It is hard, uncomfortable, and sometimes painful work. Therefore, coalition work requires that you give, retreat occasionally for nourishment, and then return to the streets “to coalesce some more” (p. 359).

Although it is important to be mindful about preserving your energy and not being a martyr to the coalition, doing coalition work means being willing to be “in trouble with the
king" as Cheryl Harris (1997, p. 101) terms it. Harris draws upon novelist Chinua Achebe's argument that there are risks inherent in confronting power, risks that are nonetheless necessary if one is to embrace the central tasks of social transformation, which Achebe believes to be the work of the artist, poet, and scholar in an unjust society. Harris too believes that the work of the scholar is to render what has been previously invisible, visible. It is to tell a different story, to create conditions for others to tell different stories, stories that are unfamiliar, even if they may be disturbing, annoying, painful, or frightening. That which oppresses must first be exposed in order to work towards resisting subordination, and in order to weaken the predominant order. That means, Harris argues, being willing to point out contradictions, to raise consciousness, and to speak on behalf of those still bearing the weight of social inequities and injustice.

Social change storytelling, as Razack (1993) explains, refers to "an opposition to established knowledge, to Foucault's suppressed knowledge, to the experience of the world that is not admitted into dominant knowledge paradigms" (p. 100). She stresses that when storytelling is used to reach across difference we must overcome the positional difference between the teller and the listener. This is a significant distinction that must be verbalized and discussed, not assumed. The inequalities in classrooms must be named and ground rules for communication devised if coalition work is to be fruitful. Formation of affinity groups must be encouraged and time to coalesce provided in order for members to be better prepared to then speak on behalf of the group. Critical pedagogy, a typical starting point when there is no existing friendship, goodwill, or sense of community, does not probe deeply enough below the surface, Razack argues; rather, we must begin with how we know. That is, epistemology has to enter into our pedagogy and we have to know the limits of our knowing.
based on our subject positions. The idea of granting epistemic privilege to the oppressed, alluded to by Narayan (1991), deteriorates when there is little understanding of various ways of knowing.

Butterwick (2003) takes social change storytelling a step further. She and her colleague Jan Selman were curious as to whether popular theater would be useful in resolving conflict and in creating conditions for speaking and listening across difference in view of the conflict that is prevalent in feminist coalition politics. Popular theater is a process of theater where communities are directly involved in identifying issues and exploring problems of oppression, analyzing conditions and causes of particular situations, determining possibilities of change, and then contributing to appropriate action. The process allows participants to rehearse various strategies and actions designed to effect change. Butterwick argues that popular theater is a powerful medium because it is accessible and does not require many resources, and because it uses the body as a means of expression and a source of knowing. Popular theater, Butterwick claims, in a manner similar to Razack’s (1993) social change storytelling, “enables community to make and perform its own stories” (Butterwick, 2003, p. 452), stories that are typically in opposition to established knowledge.

In popular theater audiences are invited to participate, to observe, to intervene, to replace a character, or to suggest that a character do something different in attempting to resolve or better understand issues. Through this process, through the experience of deep emotional engagement, through coming to know what each character wants to achieve, and through being open to criticism, significant shifts may take place in how individuals understand particular moments and particular perspectives, and dialogic encounters can be better facilitated. As Butterwick emphasizes, participatory theater becomes a tool for
exploring coalition politics, where, through the process of building scenes, all participants are required to ask, “who is speaking and why, to determine their location and relationship to others” (2003, p. 458). The gap between the positional differences of storyteller and listener that Razack (1993) refers to may be narrowed. This political listening is a kind of listening that is not primarily about evoking empathy or compassion. And it does not necessarily do away with conflicts born out of differences in identity or inequality. Its purpose, according to Bickford (1996), is to enable “political actors to decide democratically how to act in the face of conflict, and to clarify the nature of the conflict at hand” (p.2). That means all voices are heard and decisions are made collectively about what course of action makes the greatest sense. Listening, then, becomes a distinctive activity. It focuses on actual communicative interaction among political actors and does not rely on the interpretation of texts or on “a general openness to being” (Bickford, 1996, p. 3).

Reagon (1983), cited earlier, referred to the barred room, what she described as a safe place to temporarily retreat to when the burden of engaging in coalition work becomes too great. She made clear, though, that in such an insular environment, no coalition work could be done. Burack (2004), on the other hand, stresses the importance of intragroup dynamics in reducing tensions among groups, and emphasizes, as did Watts (1996), the importance of recognizing that identity groups are not monolithic. Rather, they are made up of members with different and sometimes competing identities. Burack argues that we should view these multiple identities as a means of building bridges and engaging in coalition work, rather than as a threat to group solidarity. Implied is the need for discourses where, at the least, there is tolerance toward differences within the group. She also suggests that maintaining regressive
relations with other groups requires that differences of class, ability, and sexual orientation, for example, be suppressed within the groups.

Regardless of theoretical orientation, Burack (2004) points out, conceptual coalition thinking is at the heart of building relations within and between groups and can be conceptualized at levels of analysis that include conflict within the self, within the group, and between groups. Typically, the third coalition frame, coalitions across differences between groups, garners the most attention. Nevertheless, because identity groups are made up of members distinct by other identities, Burack argues, “they are always irreducibly coalitions” (p.148). Therefore, leaders and group members must join together to mutually interpret interests and goals and lay out a plan for how those ends will be pursued. First Nations cohorts represent one such identity group and, I argue, are logically sites where positive honing of intragroup dynamics ought to be addressed. However, we must also consider the perspectives of several scholars on the topic of coalition work in American Indian contexts.

**Coalitions and Alliances: Indigenous Perspectives**

Fleming (1996) makes the point that American Indian people do not necessarily see unity among tribes against government policies as desirable. Those that make assumptions about the logic of such coalition building are under the common misconception that there exists a people called ‘American Indians’ and that they can unite to act as an effective lobby for their causes. Native people first identify themselves as members of their tribes, then as American Indians. A member of one tribe will not presume to speak for those of another tribe and assume that their issues are the same. Further, Fleming states, Native American people do not necessarily aspire to membership in mainstream American society. Such is the case, he suggests, because they were unwillingly consumed by that society, subjected to
persistent attempts to incorporate Indians forcibly into American society through federal Indian policy. In theory, American Indians acknowledge that coalition building among minority groups may provide non-whites an opportunity to have a meaningful impact on national policy, yet most are skeptical that their circumstances will be altered as a result. To engage in coalition building would mean that specific Native American issues be addressed and that other minority groups become more knowledgeable about the rich cultures of American Indians and be willing to collectively fight to rectify past wrongs.

Morris (1996) also discusses the hesitancy of American Indians to form alliances and coalitions with other peoples and organizations with similar but distinct purposes and objectives, including those often thought to be natural allies of Indigenous peoples. Others who were supposedly acting in the best interests of Indigenous peoples have “burned” them too often. Typically, those others fail to understand to any depth the goals or aspirations of the Indigenous rights movement. Morris cites, as an example of the lack of solidarity between minority groups, the seeming absence of objection by African Americans, who make up the majority of major league athletic teams, to the racist depictions of Indians as mascots or through team names. If these relatively simple issues can be ignored, is it not logical that greater divisions will erupt when complex issues of territory, forced relocation, and natural resource rights are brought to the table?

A fundamental difference raised by Morris that renders coalition work and alliances with Indigenous peoples more tenuous is that civil rights movements have traditionally been rooted in the notion that rights inure to the individual, whereas in Indigenous contexts the survival of the collective is paramount. Means (1982) argues that it is a difference between materialism or gaining, and being, which is related to a spiritual process where traditionally
wealth was given away, discarded, so as not to gain individually. In any case, the enormity of the crises facing Indigenous peoples, Morris (1996) adds, requires the construction of alliances and coalitions with movements and organizations willing to be patient, sympathetic and open to new depths of understanding of unique Indigenous experiences and perspectives as Grande (2000) also emphasized. Under any circumstances, the conditions of such alliances must be defined in order to ensure the advancement of an Indigenous rights agenda.

Morris differentiates between unilateral assimilations, coalitions, and alliances with respect to organizational interaction with Indigenous peoples. Unilateral assimilations logically describe the historical organizations of the nineteenth and early twentieth century that reflected the prevalent paternalistic, assimilationist role of church and state in Indigenous affairs. Coalitions, Morris asserts, are usually of a semi-permanent duration where Indigenous peoples are distinct but usually in subordinate roles within larger social movements. According to Morris alliances evolved from lessons learned from early coalition experiences and are characterized by ad hoc organizations. One example of such an alliance is The National Indian Brotherhood (NIB) formed in 1970 with the objective of developing Indian self-government and control of Indian land and resources.

Another example is the Indian Homemakers' Association of British Columbia. It was formed in 1965 to amalgamate various clubs throughout the province involved in a range of initiatives that included dealing with issues of housing standards, living conditions, and Aboriginal and women's rights. Organizations such as this and other similar regional and national Aboriginal women's organizations represent the transformation of clubs formed on reserves across Canada that were originally instituted and promoted by the Department of Indian Affairs between 1930 and 1960. Prior to the 1960s these clubs focused primarily on
home economics. Although these disparate Aboriginal women's organizations or alliances are located throughout Canada to serve the varying needs of First Nations, Inuit and Métis women, the goals and objectives of each are very similar; that is, there is a commitment to improve the lives of women and their children, and that means achieving equal status in the social, political, economic and cultural life within their communities as well as in Canadian society (Report to the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, 1996). Whether termed coalitions or alliances, these organizations were formed to resist the impact of European culture. Building bridges across cultural differences was not a priority.

Social Transformation: Building Bridges Across Differences

Activism is the courage to act consciously on our ideas, to exert power in resistance to ideological pressure—to risk leaving home.
(Gloria Anzaldúa, 2002, p.5)

The lines between the notions of coalition politics and bridge building are blurred; and no doubt, they overlap. But a few scholars manage to discern subtle differences between the two notions, effecting what, I argue, is a more powerful, positive stance than either cross-cultural dialogue or coalition work manage to create, a stance that is at the least less hierarchical, less tiered, non-abrasive, and speaks of individual accountability, responsibility and agency. I will address those voices to develop and support my argument.

In the introduction to her edited book American Indian Thought, Waters (2004) succinctly summarized and highlighted key points in Verney's chapter, "On Authenticity," as it relates to my argument about bridge building. In my view, she captured the essence of Verney's point and expressed it more beautifully and clearly than Verney did herself. Waters shared how Verney has no difficulty knowing what American Indian philosophy is because she was raised by her Navajo grandparents on reserve in Arizona. Problems arise, however, when she is asked how outsiders can study Indian philosophy, and when she is asked to
explain the contributions Indian philosophy can make to traditional academic philosophy. Water shared how Verney found Heidegger's work on being helpful in clarifying how she views herself in relation to others. Waters stated,

She claims that American Indian people have unconsciously drifted from our own way of being when we regard our own being to not include others. To succumb to this way of being in the world is to give way to a dominant colonial hegemonic ontology. Embracing authentic being, for American Indians, means to embrace all beings, and to recognize the balance of interdependency and interpenetration of our life and being in the world, with all living things (Waters, 2004, p. xxviii).

This statement may be interpreted as an admonishment to American Indian people who may be reluctant to embrace members of the dominant society. But I interpret it as going beyond that. It also highlights an American Indian philosophy that embraces the interconnectedness of all things, and views our world in a holistic manner, rather than viewing the world in compartmentalized boxes. She is then, at once, implying that Western society has much to learn from Indian ways of being, that by succumbing to a dominant colonial hegemonic ontology Indigneous peoples fail to recognize the strength, beauty, and power of Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

Verney (2004) believes that Heidegger might say that as we get lost in the everydayness of Euro-American culture and its philosophical framework, we lose track of what it is to follow the traditional teachings of Indigenous peoples. Instead we must embrace our Indianness and be proud of who we are. When Euro-American academics do not know about Indigenous being, Verney sees it as a gap in their education, particularly when they see her only as a stereotypical silenced Indian presence. Rather than dismissing such individuals, Verney chooses to see such attitudes as "human blindness to the philosophical being of another human being" (p.138). Her approach is to tell her story and share her philosophy, and to remain hopeful that changes can be made in academia. She believes that Native
people have a responsibility to pass on the oral philosophical teachings of elders and to make changes within academic institutions. By making connections with those who are willing to listen to traditional oral teachings, Native philosophies can retain their meaning. There may be mutual exchanges between Indigenous peoples and all others. Although the difference between Verney’s (2004) stance and that of scholars engaged in coalition work reviewed earlier may be subtle, it is significant. It has an embodied flavor that serves to “turn the tables” on traditional Western philosophizing.

The recent writings of Anzaldúa (2002) and Keating (2002) in their edited collection *This Bridge We Call Home* also have a refreshingly optimistic tone. Keating states that contributors to this collection are rewriting culture; through their words the connections between women of color, men, and all who are willing to listen, are deepened and expanded. The writers are convinced that their words have the power to initiate change and form coalitions that “cut across boundaries” (2003, p. 17). Spiritual activism, Keating believes, begins with the personal and moves outward to acknowledge what she calls “our radical interconnectedness” (p.18). She argues that this spirituality for social change recognizes our many differences while at the same time using our commonalities as catalysts for social transformation. In contrast to identity politics, which requires that specific categories of identity be maintained, spiritual activism insists that we let them go. Keating believes that erecting walls that separate us from each other is destructive. To render her argument tangible, one might say that if we concede that we are all connected, then the events and belief systems impacting on our sisters and brothers in far-reaching parts of the world have a concrete effect on each of us, we all rise or fall as one. Keating challenges us to decide whether or not we will take the risk of crossing over the threshold into the unknown or if we
will choose instead to cling “desperately to the place we are not at” (p.19). She believes we must cross over even though we do not know what awaits us on the other side of the bridge.

Keating (2002) argues further that differences do not go away, even if we attempt to hide them under a façade of sameness or alternatively build rigid walls between self and other. Daring to cross over into that unknown space is to be open to the lives of others, and to use that openness “as pathways to explore possible points of connection” (p.519). Like Anzaldua (1983) Keating believes that by changing ourselves, we have the potential to change the world. Change is a two-way movement. She makes clear though that she is not denying the validity of individual beliefs, desires, and experiences. Rather, she encourages us to enter into each other’s lives through reading, storytelling and conversation, and to listen to each other with an open heart and mind. When we meet those we encounter with openness, walls become permeable. In the classroom that means, for example, designing courses where students may grapple with conflicting worldviews and are taught to draw connections and avoid the creation of us/them binaries. Keating also suggests that the introduction of issues of race be delayed until such topics as individual goals and activism are discussed, then move to a discussion of how race and other categories influence positions. She also argues that race must be historicized and fluidity in racial designations exposed. Keating reminds us that by making ourselves vulnerable we can learn from each other, we can explore our differences without shame or defensiveness, and we can transform barriers into bridges.

Chicana scholar Gloria Anzaldua (2002) uses the term “nepantla” to describe the liminal spaces or threshold between worlds. She argues that social transformation takes place in these unpredictable, unstable spaces. It is in these spaces that we move from
victimhood to a greater level of agency; it is where we must question what we are doing to each other, to those in distant lands, and to the ecological order. But, she adds, “it is the knowledge that we are in symbiotic relationship to all that exists and co-creators of ideologies” (p. 2) that propels us to join collaboratively with others.

Like Reagon (1983) Anzaldúa believes that there are no safe spaces to be with others like you. The desire to stay “home” and not venture beyond our own group stems from woundedness, she states, but giving in to it stagnates our growth. To bridge is to relax our borders and open the gate to the stranger within and without, to move beyond the illusion of safety, and to attempt community all the while realizing that there is risk on a personal, spiritual, and political level in doing so. To bridge compels us to attempt compassion and reconciliation. It is an act of love that requires us to be present with the pain of others. Bridge building means being willing to delve deeply into conflict in the belief that doing so will lead to greater mutual understanding and respect. Therefore, the bridge she refers to is not built for one-way traffic; the flow goes both ways. In the process we learn to honor people’s otherness. Ultimately, embracing otherness changes us and our horizons are expanded. But, as Anzaldúa (2002) states in the quote that opened this section, it takes courage to act consciously on our ideas and beliefs. It requires us to risk leaving home. I argue that leaving home means taking the risk of leaving closed cohorts and being willing to engage in bridge building from within open cohort contexts.

Summary

As I suggested at the beginning of the section, cohorts ought to be sites for intragroup coalition work. Watts (1996) emphasizes that criteria, purposes, and goals for coalition work must be clearly articulated within such cohorts, as they must be within intergroup contexts.
Intergroup sites for coalition work are prime locations where ethnic norms and reified notions of representation about any cultural group, in particular Indigenous peoples, may be dispelled. In either intragroup or intergroup contexts, coalition work is difficult, often messy, and painful, but it is necessary work if the predominant order is to be challenged, oppressors exposed, and mindsets altered to make way for greater openness and understanding of other epistemologies.

Despite varying perspectives among scholars whose work I have reviewed on what constitutes a coalition or an alliance, the goals of each are very similar, and, I suggest, readily transferable to university classroom contexts, especially those classrooms and programs focused on social justice and anti-racism agendas. Cohorts (intragroup settings) can be locations where members with different and sometimes competing identities may use these identities as a means of coalescing among group members rather than as a threat to group solidarity. Intragroup settings ought to be spaces where difference is at least tolerated. Willingness to analyze conflict within the self and within the group, to mutually interpret interests and goals then laying out a plan for pursuing them, will lead to greater problem solving and understanding between groups. First Nations cohorts represent the possibility of sites for such intragroup planning and action, such coalition work all the while keeping in mind that the advancement of an Indigenous agenda must be at the fore of any alliances or coalitions, where unique experiences and perspectives are emphasized. And yet, as with the notions of cross-cultural dialogue, there are gaps in aspects of coalition politics, some aspects of which are complemented through the notion of bridge building.

Some scholars use the language of bridge building rather than border crossing to refer to what has also been termed coalition work. I find the term border crossing to be
While it is true that border crossing can be a place where there is a mutual two-way flow of traffic, the phrase “to border cross” may also connote the action of fleeing, of moving across a border to a sometimes-mythical “better place.” That image does not leave open much space for mutuality of sharing and exchange of ideas, experiences and worldviews. Rather, it suggests giving something up in trade for residence in the new, superior location.

Verney reminds us that in order for Indigenous peoples to embrace an authentic being we must be open to including others; we must recognize that the notion of embracing the interdependency and interpenetration of all living things is about more than words. Implied too, in her statement, is her belief that Indigenous peoples have much to teach Western society. But we must be mindful of the importance of recognizing the strength, beauty and power of traditional Indigenous ways of being and knowing and not get caught up in the everydayness of Euro-American culture. Verney chooses to see Euro-American academics’ lack of knowledge of Indigenous being as their shortcoming, but she remains optimistic and open to making connections with those who are willing to listen to her stories and worldview. Her stance reveals an attitude that is optimistic, proud, and proactive, rather than defensive, woeful and victim-like. It suggests a two-way bridging of cultures where each serves to benefit.

Anzaldua (2002) and Keating (2002) also believe that social transformation begins with the self and moves outward to recognize our interconnectedness, despite our differences. By changing ourselves we have the potential to change the world. Neither scholar advocates the surrendering or denial of individual beliefs or values, but instead invites us to bridge the abyss of difference by daring to enter each other’s worlds with open minds and hearts, to
begin the process of dismantling previously impermeable walls, and to avoid the perpetuation of us/them binaries. It is in those thresholds between worlds that we become active agents of change individually and collectively. Through analysis of participant voices in chapters four, five, and six I will argue why open cohorts can be locations for such spiritual activism.
CHAPTER THREE: EMERGENT RESEARCH DESIGN: WALKING THE WALK

Introduction

When conducting research in First Nations contexts and eliciting the perspectives of First Nations people, it is important that the principles of respect, responsibility, relevance and reciprocity be honored. In this chapter I introduce the research methods used by elaborating on that argument and drawing parallels between those principles and the notion of emergent research design. I then address criteria for participation in the study, the decision making process for inviting participation, and methods used. Next, I turn to a discussion of decisions that were made to alter initial plans followed by my process of data analysis. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of my position as researcher.

Honoring Research Participants and Research Intentions

Lack of respect for First Nations core values and cultural knowledge is a compelling and ongoing problem at university for First Nations students. More often than not, students find that only decontextualized literate knowledge counts. If First Nations student retention rates are to improve, Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) argue, universities must examine their policies and practices to ensure they are respectful and relevant to First Nations considerations. They argue further that faculty must enter into a reciprocal relationship with their students to enable the formulation of new paradigms or explanatory frameworks that have the potential to establish a greater equilibrium and congruence between the literate world of the institution and the day-to-day world of the students.

Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) insist that all organizational participants must be encouraged to consider how they may reconstruct the organization's culture to celebrate First
Nations students' own histories, and create a place where students “are helped to examine critically how their lives are shaped and molded by society’s forces” (p.12). Developing strategies and policies from such a vision is not as daunting a task as it may seem. It simply requires working with First Nations people to shift policy, posture and practice in a respectful, relevant, reciprocal, and responsible manner. The same principles hold when conducting qualitative research in First Nations contexts, most especially when a goal of the research is to elicit First Nations perspectives. Tom’s (1996) discussion of “living the commitment to emergent design”(p.347) has been helpful as I engaged in analyzing the research as it was in process and made necessary changes, and as I worked to ensure that I adhered to principles of respect, relevancy, and reciprocity.

Tom emphasizes that in qualitative research it is not very popular to reflect on “the relationship between changing research strategies and enduring philosophical and methodological commitments” (1996, p.347), and then write about the necessary changes. To do so can be uncomfortable. It can feel like a failure of the original research design to change plans and seem less interesting than a discussion of what worked. But, she argues, there are compelling reasons to discuss changes if the notion of emergent research design is to be understood, if there is a commitment to community involvement, and if the research is to remain relevant. Reflecting on the motivation for changes in plans as part of the decision-making process increases the likelihood that the research intentions will be respected. Researchers who are open to involving participants in naming structural problems in their lives and collaboratively devising strategies to overcome them are less likely to protect themselves by dealing with participants lives as abstractions.

Kenny (2003) concurs with Tom, as she reminds us that a belief in adaptability and
change is at the core of Aboriginal worldviews. A flexible research design, a requirement that the researcher views the people and settings holistically, with sensitivity to and respect for the effects of the research on the participants, are among the characteristics of qualitative research she highlights. Such characteristics help ensure that the stories and viewpoints of the people participating in the research are revealed and serve to ‘decolonize’. In such work the power of Aboriginal people re-emerges. Eber Hampton (1995) wrote about the discomfort and feelings of vulnerability he experienced after altering his research design. Nonetheless, Hampton experienced feelings of exhilaration, knowing that powerful learning was happening. Through reflection on the interview process with participant involvement Hampton clarified and honed the purpose and focus of his research; collaboratively they moved toward “the explication of implicit consensus” (p.13). It was with these thoughts in mind that I engaged in data gathering, prepared to make changes as necessary.

For this research I conducted semi-structured interviews. I interviewed 13 women two times each for approximately 24 hours altogether, asking them about their educational experiences, about gratifying and challenging aspects of their cohort experience(s), about their experiences with being silenced in any educational context, and about their cross-cultural experiences in general. I also asked for their perspectives on the importance of First Nations curricula and pedagogy in educational curricula. Not only did new themes emerge through the process of conducting individual interviews with female First Nations graduate students, I also became increasingly aware of just what “living the commitment to emergent design” really meant in practice.
Criteria for Participation in the Study

Criteria for participation in my study were straightforward. All participants were or had been in graduate programs and have experienced some form of First Nations cohort membership, either at the graduate or the undergraduate level. For some, that cohort experience was created and sponsored by a university (structured) and for others it was initiated and created in a more informal manner (unstructured) by First Nations people themselves.

I restricted the sample to women. Gender is an important variable in terms of how individuals experience the world. It therefore would be a dynamic in the cohorts and in the data collected. Men who have been graduate students and have had a cohort experience could have added valuable insights on the topics of cross-cultural dialogue in relation to their cohort experience. Since the majority of First Nations students are women, however, I wanted to focus on an in-depth analysis of their experience. The experience of men in mixed gender cohorts is another research project.

In a similar vein, I only invited the participation of First Nations (including Métis and mixed ancestry) women rather than opening the study to other Indigenous peoples. While it was enticing to consider inclusion of Indigenous peoples such as, for example, Native American, Hawaiian or Sami women with whom I am acquainted, working only with First Nations participants simplified the study for the same reasons that working with women only does, and renders it more manageable. This decision supports the view expressed by Eber Hampton (1995) that confining the study to the multiple First Nations represented in my sample allows for the possibility of making a greater contribution towards a theory of cohortness and cross-cultural dialogue than could be offered were I to attempt to “gather all
disparate [global] tribes and communities into one grand model” (1995, p.12). I chose to restrict the size of my sample to between 8 and 16 women in order to explore the experiences of the participants in depth rather than in breadth.

**Inviting Participation**

I made the decision to examine the notion of “cohortness” rather than focus on one cohort in order to allow me to explore varying manifestations of what cohort membership meant to students. I sent Letters of Initial Contact with an overview of my proposed research to members of closed First Nations Master of Education cohorts with whom I had worked in some capacity over the past few years, including as course instructor. These students gathered regularly over two years for all of their coursework, and for the purpose of preparing for and taking their comprehensive examinations. Membership criteria included an interest in First Nations education either because of their own ancestry and/or their work with First Nations students in various contexts.

Invitations were extended to all members of an existing cohort and the onus was then on individuals to indicate interest in participation and mail their signed letters of interest, or to call me for further clarification as necessary. By extending invitations to all in the existing cohort through letters I decreased the likelihood of feelings of alienation that might have occurred if I had chosen only some students. Space was also provided on the Letter of Initial Contact for individuals to suggest the names of other possible participants who fit the criteria. No additional names were provided from this sampling. Of those 16 women in closed cohorts, 5 expressed interest in the topic as described in my letter of initial contact. Geography seemed not to be a factor as 3 of the 7 participants lived outside the B. C. Lower
Mainland and chose to schedule appointments for interviews on the weekends when they were in town for coursework.

I considered very carefully decisions about other possible participants. Before proceeding beyond the first seven interviews I thought carefully about what I already had in terms of data and what I still wanted to know. In other words, what would provide the richest data in terms of coming to better understand First Nations female graduate students’ worldviews, varying interpretations of the notion of “cohortness,” and the role such membership plays in facilitating cross-cultural dialogue in all of its manifestations? As Marshall and Rossman (1995) make clear, the research design must maximize the possibility that the researcher will be successful in eliciting the sought-after information. After considering characteristics manifest in the cohort I had already interviewed and those I wished to consider, I extended invitations to eight women I had worked with in some capacity in the past and whose cohort experience fit my criteria for closed or open cohort membership. Of those eight, six agreed to participate. I discuss that decision-making process later in the chapter in the section entitled – “Walking the Walk: Altering and Adjusting Research Plans.”

Research Methods

Interviews were conducted in locations most convenient to the participant. Choices included my office, a participant’s office, a secluded park bench, my car, a hotel room, a participant’s sundeck, and a booth in a restaurant. Some participants wished to share food and beverages during or after the interview, while others were more conscious of time and other commitments. From my perspective the important consideration was that they were
comfortable in the setting that was chosen. The interviews were conducted between January 20, 2003 and April 19, 2003.

I used semi-structured and open-ended questions in conducting interviews. This approach allowed me to pursue topics raised by interviewees and to ask them about topics raised earlier in their own and others' interviews. Therefore, rather than developing an interview schedule, I articulated interview goals and developed sample questions. These questions included, for example, queries about participants' educational experiences, thoughts on gratifying and challenging aspects of cohort membership, views on the importance of First Nations curricula and pedagogy in formal educational settings, experiences with silencing in post-secondary classrooms, and highlights of their cross-cultural experiences. I made it clear to participants that they should respond only to questions that they were comfortable answering.

After the first interview and after having reviewed my notes and the transcript thoroughly I made adjustments to the research plan, adding three questions to my list of sample questions and deleting one. From that point on I did not find it necessary to add or delete any further questions. All interviews were tape-recorded. I took scant notes during the interviews so that I could engage fully with participants. Occasionally I glanced at my sample questions to ensure that questions important to my research goals were addressed. Immediately after the interviews I reflected on the session and wrote field notes to capture and hold the essence of the interview beyond the words spoken. Sometimes I wrote field notes after or in the midst of transcribing the tape, particularly if I was struck by the profundity of the experience. Because I listened to and transcribed the tapes myself I was in a position to note subtle nuances such as voice inflection, pause time, deep breaths, tears and
joyful laughter. I was able to experience the emotions once again myself, and to capture the power of these women's voices in a holistic way that may have escaped me had I hired someone to transcribe the tapes.

I also made notes as I transcribed and kept track of questions and stories that needed further clarification or elaboration. These notes and the input of the participants helped to shape the follow-up interviews. When each transcription was complete I returned it to the participant and attempted to schedule a follow-up interview at each participant's convenience. Seven chose to meet with me to do so, one made changes to the transcript and returned it to me, one communicated desired changes to the transcript by email, and four saw no need to follow-up further. For one participant there were a total of three interviews – the initial interview followed by two more. She had re-read the transcript several times and had decided to elaborate several points.

Initial interviews were designed to focus on having the interviewees share some of their educational experiences as undergraduate and graduate students, most particularly in relation to their experiences in First Nations cohorts. Follow-up interviews were designed to focus on elaborating or clarifying themes arising from the previous interviews. I planned to conduct focus group interviews after all individual interviews were completed, adopting the modified talking circle focus group approach used by Kenny, Muller, and Purdon (2001). Such an approach involves recording questions and themes that arise from the individual interviews on chart paper and posting them in the room. Participants are then invited to respond as they choose to the questions and topics, the purpose being to guide rather than dominate the session. In a traditional talking circle participants sit in a circle and an object (commonly a feather, stone, or talking stick) is passed around the group as each person tells
their story, in this case while being mindful of the posted questions/themes. The talking circle format, as Kenny et al (2001) point out, provides an atmosphere of ceremony, seriousness, and healing. While talking circle is a commonly practiced Aboriginal pedagogical strategy it has been infrequently adopted as a research method.

I turn now to an explanation of my altered and adjusted research plans, and a discussion of the decision making process for enlarging my sample beyond the initial seven participants, decisions that were driven by the reflective process and discussions I was engaged in throughout the research.

Walking the Walk: Altering and Adjusting Research Plans

With an eye to my research goals and the research as conversation atmosphere I desired to create, I first reminded participants of the intended format and then began each interview by asking them to tell me a little about their undergraduate or graduate school experiences. I listened attentively, engaging with my participant, and finding appropriate, respectful segues into other questions. Surrendering to the conversation in this way means questions don’t necessarily follow in any particular order and may often be raised or absorbed within the context of another question, topic, or narrative. Accordingly, the wording of some questions will vary from the sample question. New themes may sometimes emerge making it necessary for the researcher to assess the significance of the theme in relation to the overall goals and decide if further probing is warranted. Should that assessment hold, post-interview, the researcher must be prepared to make adjustments to the overall interview plan. Early in the process, well before conducting follow-up interviews, I began to consider abandoning the focus group component of my research plan for several reasons.
Of my first two interviewees, Sheila indicated that she wished to take ownership of her words and thoughts and signed the Consent Form giving me permission to use her name in the dissertation and any publications generated as a result of the interview. The other interviewee opted at that point to request use of a pseudonym, and signed the form agreeing to allow me to choose the name to be used. This was a pattern that persisted throughout all of the interviews: approximately one-half chose to be identified by their real names. That would prove to be a significant factor in my decision about whether or not to conduct focus group interviews. If some of the women desired anonymity, yet were willing to discuss potentially controversial issues with me during individual interviews, how could I then ask them to participate in focus group interviews to discuss those issues further when their identities would be exposed? For those who were members of existing cohorts, participation in focus group interviews meant risking possible disruption to the existing dynamics of their cohort.

During interviews, participants shared perspectives about many issues including their undergraduate and graduate school experiences with being silenced (sometimes within their cohort), dealing with racist attitudes, and other aspects of cross-cultural dialogue. These observations, reflections, critiques, and interpretations had the potential to be controversial or contentious, especially when they related to their current cohort experience. Such comments were never offered flippantly. In fact I observed that each woman who did so paused to choose her words carefully and respectfully, but chose to state them nevertheless. How could some of these women be expected to discuss these issues openly in the context of a talking circle focus group if they desired anonymity in the writing of the thesis, or even more importantly, if they had not felt comfortable sharing them within the cohort? As Archibald,
Selkirk Bowman, Pepper, Urion, Mirehouse, and Shortt (1995) point out, focus groups are useful and appropriate when, among other things, an in-depth explanation is necessary; when previously used methods reveal relationships that are inexplicable or paradoxical, and a broader context is needed for explanation; and when groups of people respond to a question obliquely. These conditions, as it turned out, did not hold in any of the individual interviews. In fact, controversial questions were generally responded to in a very in-depth, open, and thorough manner.

At the conclusion of the initial interviews with structured cohort members I felt confident about the wisdom of my decision to abandon the focus group talking circle component. Perhaps as importantly, I realized that I had the data I desired, data that came from the women's individual perceptions of the cohort experience that were in large measure based on how each had experienced the world thus far. My confidence in this adjustment to the research design was further affirmed as I conducted the follow-up interviews.

In making decisions about how I might best enlarge my sample I considered a range of options. I considered women who had been members of what I term a "modified cohort" during their graduate program that began 12 years ago at a university located in the lower mainland of British Columbia. At the outset of this program these First Nations women took some of their courses together with other First Nations students, had a role to play in designing those courses, and took other courses in mainstream contexts. Thus, I suggest, the program fits my definition of an open cohort. While I was acquainted with these women, all of whom lived and worked locally, for the most part I did not know them well. I decided to "test the waters" by approaching four of them with Letters of Initial Contact. I received a response from only one of the women whose participation was tenuous (I received another
positive response well after I had completed data collection and analysis). She did, however, provide me with the names and contact information of other women; all lived hundreds of kilometers away and I was not familiar with any of them.

Another option was a closed First Nations cohort created by the same university as the closed cohort I had already interviewed that was located in another geographic region of British Columbia. For these prospective participants their cohort experience was relatively recent, as they had graduated two years earlier. I was familiar to members of this cohort as I had worked with them in the past and therefore had had opportunities for trust building.

The third option explored was an open cohort where members had taken core courses together, and had a voice in designing those courses. They took elective courses in mainstream contexts. Most of the women considered in this option currently reside in the lower mainland of British Columbia. They were the original members of this new concept for delivery of First Nation graduate studies at this university. More than twenty years had passed since they graduated and they would therefore reflect on their cohort experience with some distance, possibly with greater insight in terms of the long-term impact of the experience. I was familiar with four of these women but had had fewer opportunities for trust building.

The fourth possibility was very similar to the third as possible participants were members of the same cohort. However, they resided in the central interior of British Columbia and I was familiar with only one of the women whose names were provided to me.

My last option was what I consider to be a less structured open cohort. Members of the cohort took anywhere from one to four courses with Indigenous content that were primarily made up of Indigenous students, and took other courses in mainstream contexts.
from a range of departments. These open cohort members also participated in a range of other First Nations gatherings from informal “get together” sessions, to workshops, to formal symposia. After analyzing my options I sent Letters of Initial Contact to eight women who fit the criteria for closed and open cohort membership. All were familiar to me through these various activities, all were geographically accessible, and six of the eight agreed to participate. I rapidly scheduled and conducted their initial interviews and then began the follow-up interviews for all participants.8

I share the following story because it influenced how I understood the intent and potential of a follow-up interview as a significant component of the overall research design, leading me to examine if and how I was prepared to live the commitment to emergent design. Because of one participant’s response to reading the transcript I altered how I approached all subsequent follow-up interviews. I re-framed my opening question. I had planned to ask, “After reading the transcript are there any changes you would like to make? Any additions? Any deletions? Any elaborations?” Instead I began the session with, “Tell me about your reaction or response to the process of reading the transcript of your interview.” This change allowed the follow-up interview to be as relevant for the participant as it was for me.

I was caught by surprise when I began the first follow-up interview. This experience provided new insights about the potential value of the follow-up interview. Val burst into the room and before I could start the tape recorder and approach the session in a systematic fashion she began telling me about her experience in reading the transcript, what she had learned and, more importantly, come to terms with about herself by engaging in this process. In the initial interview she had discussed how challenging it had been for her while pursuing

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8 I note here that I have altered somewhat the process for inviting participation. I have done so to protect the anonymity of any participant who chose to use a pseudonym.
her undergraduate degree. During that time she struggled with isolation from family despite the discord in her family at that time. She talked about how difficult it was to support herself financially, often times working several jobs to put a roof over her head, clothe herself, eat and pay tuition fees, all the while trying to maintain good grades. She had struggled. Yet having read the transcript Val saw her own story in a different light. She stated:

There were all these factors that played into the reasoning for different times of the year when I had a hard time. And it was more like looking at myself not from a judgmental me, but from a younger person who had these things happen, these chains of events, and then it becomes more fact than opinion. So then when you get to look at yourself that way, when you get to share again about yourself you don’t feel shy about what you’re saying. It’s just like, “This is the fact. This is where I’m at”, and explaining it from there in factual terms instead of, “It was so lousy,” or having an opinion about myself before I get to say what the facts are. (Val’s follow-up interview, April 8, 2003)

She went on to provide an example of how that new awareness played out at an event the night before. I found Val’s response noteworthy for two reasons. First, I understood that the follow-up interview could provide a space for participants to share how the experience of reading their own words in relation to new experiences could deepen understanding of themselves. For Val, for example, through self-reflection triggered by reading the transcript of her interview, a deeper understanding had been achieved, which is a goal of emancipatory research that Tom (1996) argues is at least as significant as the generation of empirically grounded theoretical knowledge.

Secondly, I argue that Val treated the transcript as a form of literary text, a text created through our conversation where stories and memories were recalled and analyzed, where Val interpreted the relationship between history, memory, culture, and identity. It appears that Val selected what Rosenblatt (1989) terms a
predominantly aesthetic stance toward the transaction with the transcript. That is, rather than targeting the factual accuracy of the transcript (an efferent stance) Val focused on what was being lived through - "the sensations, images, feelings, and ideas that are the residue of past psychological events involving those words and their referents" (Rosenblatt, 1989, p.159). From this perspective, as Sumara (2001) points out, literary engagements can be, and usually are, sites for aesthetic enjoyment as well as for creative and critical learning. Val herself indirectly supports this interpretation of her reading of the transcript when she states, "There is just so much that is interesting. I haven't read it for a second time yet, but I read it through once and I couldn't put it down."

I saw Val the day after the follow-up interview. Her first response was, "I have more thoughts to offer about this! But I guess it has to stop somewhere." Of course, I wanted to hear more. I recognized that we were engaged in an ongoing conversation and that the transcript(s) as literary text had become the focal point around which Val’s ideas in relation to her studies, her family life, her work, and her evolving sense of self are continually being developed and interpreted (Sumara, 2001).

As if to confirm my argument that an interview transcript may be viewed as a literary text, in a third conversation Val referred to a passage in the follow-up transcript where she shared how she overheard someone close to her discussing how she presents herself differently in First Nations and non-First Nations environments, depending on her comfort level. She began by saying, "My favorite part of the transcript was when . . ." as one might do when referring to the reading of a novel. By this point she had read both transcripts several times, but she pointed out, "I don’t have to keep reading it as a text, I reread it in my
mind, I recall passages." She then referred to a passage that I had placed in brackets, "gestures to her heart," and pondered aloud, "I wonder how someone else reading this would interpret that passage and gesture?" Ongoing rereadings of the text have created a form of mindfulness for Val, "similar to a meditative practice, where researchers continue to collect new information and interpretations into a commonplace organized by their literary engagements" (Sumara, 2001, p.98). Val's involvement had truly become an exercise in reciprocity where both she and I benefited; she had become co-researcher.

While reading passages in the transcript Val observed the emergence of multiple themes including where she has been silenced within and outside of the cohort. As she continued to reflect on this in the time between reading the transcript and the follow-up interview Val realized that she was examining and analyzing how she handled such instances in multiple and varied settings, in terms of both her reaction and her preparedness to respond. As an example, Val highlighted a recent experience where the man sitting next to her during a group discussion responded to another woman's use of the term "Indian." She stated:

Again, there was this third eye; that insight into yourself is so important. I'm just sitting there going, "He's treating me like I'm invisible but I don't want to lose it right here on the spot or anything, but I do take offense to that. I can't believe it!" I chose to leave it alone. He said one other racist thing that I didn't like either, but I will probably take it up with him at some point ... I'm one step closer to being able to say something calmly and take action. I think that over a lifetime I will make it my goal but I'm very patient with myself about saying things at the right time. I don't believe in losing ground over things like that. (Val's follow-up interview, April 8, 2003)

Two other participants had new stories, insights, and connections to share in the follow-up interviews, all triggered by their thorough readings of the transcript from the initial interview and further reflection about questions raised in the interview. They did not refer to the transcript with language that suggested they saw it as a literary text as Val did. However,
they did at times interpret questions and their own words and stories in new ways that were prompted by the transcript. That led them to focus on what was being lived through in their earlier responses, and then elaborate or clarify significant perspectives on themes, as the reader often does when reading a literary text. My point is that it is how we approach the follow-up interview that creates conditions for factual accuracy, aesthetic responses, or both. Of course, we must also take into account the personal preference and characteristics of the participants.

Earlier I discussed my decision not to conduct the focus group interviews. Indeed, the soundness of that adjustment to the research design was affirmed when, with respect to her experiences with silencing within the cohort, Val mused, “I think that if I’d been the same person in a mainstream program, with a whole mix of other people, I would have been even more silenced about my present identity.” She was alluding to a discussion earlier in the interview where she felt upset about repeated comments from cohort members that were dismissive of her beliefs but she was unable to speak out and argue her perspective. The phrase in the quotation above, “I would have been even more silenced . . . ,” indicates her awareness of the degrees of silencing she experiences in different contexts. She is clear now that her confidence is growing and she sees it as a long-term goal to come to voice.

I emphasize once more that had I forged ahead with my original plan to conduct focus group interviews without reflecting on and factoring in how individuals saw themselves and their roles within and apart from the cohort, I might have contributed to the silencing of individuals such as Val. As well, I came to understand more deeply what reciprocity means in the research process. The process and relationship does not end with the follow-up interview or when we think we have enough data. It is an on-going relationship where
mutual supportiveness is implicit (Tom and Herbert, 2002). Allowing adherence to the original research plans to take precedence over adherence to the original research intentions, at potential cost to the participants, is hardly an emancipatory action (Tom, 1996). As Kenny (2003) points out, in conducting research with First Nations people I have a responsibility to ensure that people, settings, or groups are not reduced to variables but, rather, are viewed holistically. I have come to realize and appreciate through first hand experience how emergent research design has a significant role to play in shaping genuinely responsive research approaches, and must be much more than mere rhetoric (Tom, 1996).

**Analysis of Data**

Analysis of the data began in informal ways as I engaged in the interview process. That is, I was always conscious of the themes that were emerging as I proceeded. But analysis began in earnest as I listened to and transcribed the interviews. As I listened to each interview I made notes. After transcribing all tapes, including those from follow-up interviews, I determined which themes seemed most compelling and relevant to my research questions. Next, I read all of the transcripts and continued to sort, extract and cluster around headings and sub-headings relating to a research question, theme or concept in a manner similar to how Hampton (1995) described his data analysis process. Not surprisingly, some themes or sub-themes overlapped. Rather than using a data analysis computer program, I coded by hand using color-coded post-it notes as I felt greater comfort with a visual hands-on approach. I read the transcripts three times, adjusting the codes as my interpretations changed with each reading, with each pass on the mobius strip as Bateson (1996) metaphorically describes the experience of repeated revisiting of the same material. The post-it notes allowed me to easily make coding changes or to indicate those interview
passages that might fit under several themes or sub-themes. Then, using a process of “drag and drop,” I compiled data under headings and sub-headings or key words in Word files.

With key themes and sub-themes in hand I then drew up an outline of what I perceived to be the shape of the dissertation at that point, an outline from which I could begin to draft the manuscript. Because I had read the transcripts frequently I was very knowledgeable about their content beyond what fitted into my initial themes and sub-themes. There were times throughout the writing of early drafts when conversations with my supervisor, committee members and others, as well as other experiences or readings prompted me to re-prioritize my themes. I discarded some that were less central to the overall arguments than I had earlier thought and revamped others to include data that may have previously gone uncoded. As I reclaimed order I put aside the files on themes that I found interesting, but not central to the dissertation, for later articles. From that point on my research questions and the overall shape of the dissertation shifted and changed but the key themes developed from the participants’ words did not. In short, the processes of data analysis and dissertation writing were further examples of this work as emergent research.

**Positioning Myself as Researcher**

There is a saying among my people that each of us is like the individual, multi-colored kernels on a cob of corn: “We are kernels on the same corn cob.” Each corn kernel has a particular shape, form, colour, and hue. No two are exactly alike, but each kernel leans up against another kernel to form a community, and that community is the corncob.

(Gregory Cajete, 2000, p.184)

Cultural identity, as Kirin Narayan (1993) suggests, has tended to outweigh other identifications of the researcher with respect to its association with insider or outsider status. Other considerations or factors in the researcher/researched relationship including education, age, gender differences, sexual orientation, class, race, and disability are often downplayed in
favor of the illumination of cultural identity as focal point. Narayan argues that, rather than engaging in further rhetoric about the distinction between "native" and "non-native" anthropologists, it might be more profitable to acknowledge the complexities of multiple, shifting identifications, and place greater emphasis on the quality of relations with those we seek to represent in our texts. Narayan’s proposal resonates appealingly with me as I struggle to articulate how I position myself as researcher while recognizing that I too recognize the complexities of my own multiple, shifting identities. My perception of that position was rendered even more ambiguous as I moved through the processes of research proposal writing, data gathering, data analysis, and writing.

I noted at the outset, and continue to acknowledge post data collection, that I am afforded a degree of “insiderness” because of my identity as a First Nations person. I was known to all participants either because of being their course instructor, because I was coordinator of a First Nations initiative in which they had worked, or because of participation in numerous First Nations gatherings, whether formal or informal. Through those experiences there is a shared sense of knowing Aboriginal ways through which trust is either built or it is not. As a result of the negative history of researcher/researched relations since the process of colonization began (Smith, 1999) Indigenous people are unlikely to participate in research projects unless there is some perceived benefit to Indigenous people. Those who chose to participate may have done so for various reasons. Some may have developed a sense of trust that I would use their words respectfully. In fact, before proceeding two people sought assurances that they would have an opportunity to read the transcripts of their interviews and make desired changes. As well, they wished to at least have the opportunity to read the sections where their words were used if they so chose.
If I am to create an atmosphere of trust and openness in the research context where participants feel free to reveal important memories and experiences, I must share something of myself to some extent as well. Prospective participants must know something about me as First Nations undergraduate and graduate instructor, elementary school teacher, writer, First Nations program coordinator, parent, and the like. Having been known to members of the closed cohort while I was instructor may have further enhanced my degree of “insider” status when I became researcher. To some extent that may be the case with participants representing the open cohort, where I have engaged in multiple “ice-breaker” activities, talking circles and other community building activities.

And yet, returning to Narayan’s (1993) argument, I believe that identification of the researcher is more complex than simply assuming a shared cultural identity as determinant of insider/outsider status. To do so ignores other factors including gender, educational interests, class, or as Narayan points out, “sheer duration of contacts that may outweigh the cultural identity we associate with insider/outsider status” (1993, p. 672). In short, to assume that cultural identity is the only criterion for participation in research is to ignore the multiple planes along which identity is created. To focus heavily on cultural identity may serve to de-emphasize the complexities of shifting identifications amid a sea of “interpenetrating communities and power relations” (p.671), a point rendered even more significant given that many of these participants alluded to their multiple identities within the interviews.

If the researcher is to recognize the multiple planes along which identity is created it is necessary to consider the duration and nature of the relationships built with those who agreed to participate in the research. That is, how much did the formation of a relationship with me over time factor into these women’s decision to participate in this research? In my
case many one-to-one conversations or small group discussions had taken place where shared interests in multiple and varied topics had already been explored and trust had been built. For example, of those women who agreed to participate, I had shared coordinating duties for First Nations events with two different individuals, I had engaged in informal conversations about spiritual beliefs with two women, and I had taken lunchtime walks with members of the cohort where I was instructor.

Examining the importance of such considerations in decision making may explain, at least in part, why some individuals who were approached, but did not know me well, chose not to respond, a factor not easily dismissed when one is being asked to discuss and in some cases relive potentially painful educational experiences. That is not to suggest that other considerations such as time constraints may not have been factors, nor does it deemphasize the significance of shared First Nations identities. Rather, it opens space for a non-essentializing stance to be taken (with respect to both researcher and participants) toward the categories that classify people, including race, class, gender, age and culture, among others (Harding, 1991, cited in Denzin, 1997). By viewing the researcher/participant relationship in this way we not only demonstrate a respect for First Nations cultural integrity (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991) but we simultaneously honor the multiple voices, views, and dilemmas of those with whom we have become inextricably bonded through ties of reciprocity (Narayan, 1993, p. 672). I want to emphasize, though, that my points of view did not likely influence prospective participants' decisions, as I had not expressed opinions about the research topic with any of them, one way or the other. And, of course, at this point I did not know what the findings of the research would be.
Summary

I opened this chapter by emphasizing the importance of respecting First Nations core values and cultural knowledge when conducting research in First Nations contexts. Researchers must accept responsibility for ensuring that research practices are relevant to First Nations peoples, and that there is a reciprocal relationship between researcher and participant. I have argued that there are parallels between those principles and the notion of emergent research design. As Tom (1996) made clear, successful research must be defined “as research that emerges to meet the intentions of the research” (p. 358). That includes being sensitive to the needs and perspectives of the participants, being flexible about altering research plans as necessary, while opening space for participants’ stories to be told and the meaning of those stories explicated (Kenny, 2003). That is, adherence to original research intentions must take precedence over a rigid adherence to research plans, if genuinely responsive research approaches are to be created (Tom, 1996). The principles of First Nations research and emergent research design together became increasingly significant as I made decisions about all aspects of the research process.

By choosing to restrict participation to women, limit the number of participants, and use open-ended semi-structured interviews, I was in a position to set a conversational tone and attend fully and respectfully to participants as they shared stories and perspectives about their educational experiences. My understanding of the notion of emergent research design deepened as I engaged in early analysis of the data while transcribing interview tapes, and as I engaged in conversations about my observations with my research supervisor. New insights emerged from those experiences and led not only to my decisions to alter and adjust the
research plans but also to the realization that my willingness to make those changes was integral to meeting the research intentions.
CHAPTER FOUR:
THE BENEFITS OF COHORT MEMBERSHIP

Introduction

In this chapter I examine cohort membership and participants’ perceptions of the benefits of membership in their respective cohort. Some of the participants had been members of “Native Indian” cohorts in their undergraduate studies as well as during their graduate program. They discuss the impact of that prior experience on their formal education in general, and how that experience may have influenced their decision to seek membership in a graduate cohort, whatever the format. Benefits highlighted and discussed by participants include the sense of trust that is built over time, a shared sense of purpose, relief that there is no need to explain themselves or their history or to educate non-First Nations people about First Nations issues. I also discuss the importance of insider humor and knowing that participants noted as a benefit of membership. Many of the research participants chose to engage in Indigenous academic gatherings. They spoke of the benefits of being sustained intellectually and spiritually as a result of being exposed to Indigenous instructors and peers at these gatherings, of being with those who have a deep understanding of Indigenous people, history, and culture. Further, these women frequently spoke about the impact of having had Indigenous instructors on their post secondary education. I conclude the chapter with a discussion of the importance of having university surroundings reflective of First Nations students’ identity, of First Nations people being reflected in powerful ways, and that includes the need for Indigenous scholars being visible in numbers and in status.
"We’re All in this Together!"

The responses of research participants about the benefits of membership in a graduate cohort rendered few surprises, although the ways in which the women articulated those thoughts and expanded on them varied. At times themes that arose with individual participants overlapped and were intertwined with other themes that surfaced in interviews with other participants, making it impossible to always separate the thematic strands and discuss them in isolation. Of course, that is a logical consequence of choosing to conduct open-ended semi-structured interviews.

Several women spoke to the supportive environment and trust that was built over time, despite the range of personalities in the group. For Jill, cohort membership stood in stark contrast to her earlier formal educational experiences, both in her undergraduate degree and in grade school. In fact, she had been apprehensive about joining, fearful that earlier negative experiences of school would surface again. As it turned out, she was in awe and disbelief at the support and encouragement offered her, and the learning she was privy to throughout the process. She elaborated:

Within the group with all the women, as with any group, you recognize that we all have different personalities. Within that group there is a lot of support for each other. And I think out of this cohort there has come friendships. I think we’ve laughed together, we’ve cried together, and I think we know a lot about each other, and, just being in this cohort, seeing how we as a community can share and trust one another. And when I say share, often just in our circle, [I mean] that we share about many personal things, and in the mainstream you just can’t do that. That opportunity, it’s just not there, you just know it’s not there. It took a while to get to that trust level, but to be able to express yourself freely is good (Jill’s interview, February 8, 2003).

Alice concurred with Jill’s comments about trust. She described her closed cohort as a tight group where the atmosphere of trust had grown through the duration of the program, and where members became increasingly comfortable with each other over time.
Participants came into the cohorts with a shared purpose - to contribute to greater First Nations student success. For those who were members of closed cohorts, it was important to have that goal made clear from the outset, and an appropriate tone set. Mary felt that her cohort site coordinator was pivotal in setting that tone, which she described as firm but gentle. As Mary explained it, the coordinator had said, “We are all here for the same reason, don’t forget that. You’re here to learn and support one another.” Rather than, “Do your best. Get the best marks and we’ll see who’s best in the end.” Mary added:

Because that is how we go into society thinking, “Oh, that’s what I have to do, I have to compete.” So she set it up so that you’re not competing – “You’re here to help each other and . . . It doesn’t mean do their assignments for them, but share your thoughts and share your ideas.” She made it really clear to us, how we were to support one another. And so I think that was a benefit with this cohort, that she set it up nicely (Mary’s interview, February 28, 2003).

Jill highlighted how important it is that the work of all in the cohort be validated. She too spoke of the satisfaction of knowing that despite differences inherent in any group, members are working for a mutual purpose, “all striving pretty well for the same thing.” Others concurred with that view. Those goals included working in the best interest of First Nations people and towards increased incorporation of First Nations perspectives in First Nations education. Noreen described the bonding that took place as “that intrinsic connection” and added:

That’s like the comfort of being in the cohort. But it’s not even just that though. It’s like the power of Indian women; it’s more of a feeling that we’re all in this together working towards a common cause, which is the advancement of First Nations people and, hopefully, a better future for our kids in the school system (Noreen’s interview, January 22, 2003).

Many participants expressed relief that their cohort was a place where there was no need to explain themselves as First Nations women, nor to be seen as the First Nations
expert, expected to bring non-First Nations people “up to speed” on historical events and
contemporary issues. Alice stated:

We didn’t have to be the voice of First Nations, that would be my impression, and we
have a background in a lot of First Nations issues, we know some of the issues and
impact of residential school or when we’re talking about policy development. That one
came up in one of the first classes - Why these policies? And [what are] the results of
these policies? I think, you know, that we just come in with more immediate
experience with a lot of all of the issues and can go further forward (Alice’s interview,
February 21, 2003).

And Liz made clear her impatience with always being expected to educate others about First
Nations issues and epistemologies in mainstream contexts. She added:

And it’s always explaining to people who aren’t involved in reading the same people
and looking at it in the way that you would; it’s so much explaining and it’s so
frustrating to always have to provide all of this context so that hopefully they can
understand what you’re trying to communicate and often times I think it’s pretty
questionable if they do (Liz’s interview, February 21, 2003).

Mary saw membership in her graduate cohort program as an opportunity for her
personal growth, a chance to be a student, learning with and from others. Before the program
began she had felt stagnant, someone who was “just kind of spewing out facts and things
about our culture and our people.” Although Mary had been a member of an open First
Nations cohort while studying for her undergraduate degree she now realized that she had not
been “ready to really understand the conversation because I lacked experience. Actually, I
lacked the understanding of how important my experiences [as a First Nations person] were.”
She had entered that earlier cohort right after completion of high school and now, years later
as a mature woman and mother who had rich life experiences, Mary approached graduate
studies with a different mindset. She was ready to fully avail herself of the opportunities
cohort membership contributed to her learning. She explained:

And with this group here I realized that the only way I’m going to get through is to
share my experiences in who I am and where I come from. Why I do things and
why I think this way. And why I changed my mind and why I think this way now. Because before I said, “Oh, how do you want me to think?” And, “What shall I think?” (Mary's interview, February 28, 2003)

Margaret, a member of an open First Nations cohort, like Mary, saw her membership in the cohort as an opportunity for personal growth. One class she had taken stood out for her in particular, as there was an atmosphere of connectedness between class members and instructor. As she recalled:

There was no need to get into the rhetoric of First Nations history. There was just a general acceptance that there was a lot of damage done. Yes, there has been a lot of hurt and we still carry that hurt, but as students in this room it was recognized that we were doing something about it. By constantly focusing on the negative we wouldn’t be moving forward, and this was a class in which we needed to move forward (Margaret's interview, March 31, 2003).

The feeling of a sense of acceptance and belonging, enjoyment of study, and awareness of a shared experience and history was common to many participants, most particularly those in open cohort contexts. Beverly shared that she had never before experienced the sense of bonding and closeness that she had felt in her abbreviated Native Indian undergraduate cohort experience, or in her First Nations graduate class. She described that class as a sanctuary where people would say, “Thank God I get to come here.” Susan saw her four First Nations courses as “building blocks into developing who I am as a First Nations person, and sort of reclaiming who I was [as a child].” From her perspective there was trust involved as well; things shared in class would stay there, particularly those that could be upsetting to white students. She clarified that she did not mean derogatory comments, but students felt free to say, for instance, “I don’t like it when . . . .” Students were also willing to make themselves vulnerable, sharing, for example, their insecurities about writing, and supporting each other without fear that someone would criticize them. As Susan perceived it, “In the non-First Nations setting it’s all competition, who’s going to get
the most A's. But in this class, we're all laying out how we're feeling about grad studies. All those feelings came out and it just happened naturally. Nobody said we had to talk about it, it just came out.”

Doreen took a graduate class that focused on Aboriginal issues and epistemologies and that experience had a strong impact on her. She recalled:

It was almost completely First Nations students. I never had such a course like that before. Just before the course started I had some personal things that came up that were really unexpected and I was wondering, can I complete a course? On so many levels it was just so embracing. It was just a wonderful, wonderful . . . I was learning things I'd never learned before. I'd never had the freedom of being with First Nations students before. You just don't have to do all that other negotiation; you just can relax . . . . It was great. It was unbelievable. It was absolutely rare. And I know, I mean God I've been going to school for a long, long time and I'd never heard of such a thing (Doreen's interview, April 16, 2003).

Liz, like five other participants, had been a member of a First Nations open cohort during her undergraduate program and noted many similarities between her two cohort experiences. In her undergraduate program students were together for all courses for the first two years of the certificate program, and it was made up exclusively of women; two men who had enrolled dropped out early. Both of these cohorts had similar ranges of background experiences; for example, some people had large families, some were single people right out of their previous program (whether that was high school or an undergraduate program), some had grandchildren, and some were young women just having children. For Liz it was important for her to be surrounded with other women like her who had faced the challenges of being Aboriginal women in contemporary life. She elaborated:

You know that they've had similar experiences to you and so there's like a foundation that you all have that you don't have to do all that explaining that I was talking about before where we're all coming from not exactly the same perspectives, but very similar perspectives. And you need that kind of community so that you can have discussions that don't always start from way back there somewhere or the
bottom to get to where you want to actually have the discussion (Liz’s interview, February 26, 2003).

Liz described her First Nations graduate cohort as “more of a flat organization,” where there aren’t tensions about power and privilege, where unlike in the workplace, how you are responded to is not dependent on whether you are a teacher, paraprofessional, or administrator. Rather, it is about making connections with instructors and other people, enlarging your community, and building a mutually supportive network to be sustained over time, beyond the cohort.

“*There is Humor in the Rubble*”

Participants made reference to insider humor and knowing on a number of occasions, viewing it as a benefit of membership. Significantly, the use of humor permeates the interviews themselves as indicated by the number of times I have written “laughter” and “uproarious laughter” in brackets in the transcripts. That was the case as well in earlier research I conducted with First Nations adults (van der Wey, 2002). I argue that Indigenous peoples use insider humor both as a form of resistance and as a means of diffusing tension. Noreen, when asked about what she saw as a beneficial aspect of her graduate cohort membership, without hesitating spoke to both insider humor and insider knowing. She responded:

The power and humor of Indian women. (We both laughed) . . . We’ve had so many similar experiences; we don’t have to explain ourselves. And there is so much humor in there too, in all the rubble. The humor just shines forth. It really comes to the forefront. That, and because, I don’t know . . . .I think Indian people speak the same language (laughter) in some ways. You know, just in the way that things are expressed. I mean there’s all the academics but . . .I don’t know . . . .It’s really hard to describe this. It’s like what they say about twins, they just make up their own language and they understand each other; nobody else understands them. What we think is really funny, someone else might be really horrified by it? (Laughter) (Noreen’s interview, January 22, 2003).
Val too spoke of the sense of belonging, understanding, and shared humor she experiences when she is with First Nations people. When I invited her to speak generally about her educational experiences Val spoke first of her earlier undergraduate Native Indian cohort experience, which she said “turned out to be the best thing for me because there were nothing but First Nations people in my program and I have never experienced that before.” She recounted how, prior to her first cohort experience, while she had white friends in classes, there were rarely, if ever, other First Nations people in those classes. Val recalled how, when her first year English teacher invited members of the class to her place, the gesture made the atmosphere “a bit friendlier.” Generally, however, her earlier college years were “a little bit lonely because I didn’t have anybody to say . . . you know, to get together or whatever.” In terms of camaraderie, those “bits and pieces were okay, but when you compare it to what you get in [the Native Indian program], it’s like night and day” (Val’s interview, February 11, 2003).

Val provided several examples on what she meant by the sense of knowing, understanding, and shared humor she had experienced when she was in First Nations contexts. She suggested that there was “a theme in her life” in that she had always had a white set of friends and a First Nations set of friends. But when she met Toni, who was First Nations, while they were both doing their college prep at a regional campus, she recognized and reflected later on the power of that meeting. When they had exchanged background information about where each was from there was an immediate sense of knowing about the other and a shared “dry sense of humor.” Although they didn’t take any classes together and have traveled in diverse directions academically and geographically since that time, to this day they consider themselves “to be leading parallel lives.” That relationship differed from
one she had with Lisa, one of her white friends. Val explained that she and Toni have “similar ways of being.” They have a connection, an affinity for each other, and despite long time lapses between getting together they continue to have that connectedness.

And we both know that we both grew up in these small towns. And she kind of gets my parents’ sense of humor that is really kind of cruel. One time it was snowing really hard (laughter) and she came outside the house, she fell down and my parents called her Humpty Dumpty. It was kind of mean but she just laughed, and she still talks about it when I see her. “Oh yeah, and how are your parents?” and “Remember that time they called me Humpty Dumpty?” . . . .They’re just from a small town and they didn’t immediately say “Oh, are you okay?” or anything like that right, nothing polite! (laughter) She just understands them because she’s from a small town (Val’s interview, February 11, 2003).

Each time Toni gets together with Val she brings up the story, as a means of saying, “See, even now that we have moved on in our professional and private lives, see how we still understand each other.” At least that is how Val interprets it. Other tales were told reflecting incidences of insider humor, insider knowing that included both First Nations friends and family. Val’s non-First Nations husband also noticed the affinity she has with other First Nations people at various gatherings. She recalled an example of his observation of how her behavior changes when she is with her people, how he has “observed that pattern of just being switched over.” She provided clarification:

And Mark, my husband even notices . . . when I’m around . . . .We went out for my birthday on Saturday night and I heard him tell somebody, “Whenever Val’s just around her . . . .” I don’t know what they were talking about but he said - “All they do is laugh! All they do is laugh, laugh, laugh, . . . all you can hear is all this laughter.” I don’t know what he was referring to exactly but it was scenarios when I’m with my own people. (Val’s interview, February 11, 2003)

Val’s description of her behavior when she was with “her people” and her husband’s observations of her pattern of “switching over” was similar to Shirley Sterling’s (1992) account of her family rituals and the humor that marked their work parties in her novel My Name is Seepeetza. Sterling wrote:
Then we all started to get happy, even the big girls. We started joking and laughing like Mum and Aunt Mamie and Yay-yay do when they're cleaning berries or fish together at home. They tell stories and laugh all day while they're working. Sometimes they have to work all night when the fish are running, and still they stay jolly and happy. (p.13)

In fact, throughout Sterling's (1992) novel she juxtaposes very poignant, sometimes disturbing accounts of her life at the residential school and at home at Joyaska Ranch with timely doses of humorous anecdotes. It is as though she intersperses humor as a device to disrupt the weightiness of the text for the reader, to render the experience bittersweet. And yet, I suspect humor was also employed as an antidote for Sterling and other First Nations children as a form of resistance and as a survival mechanism throughout their years at the residential school.

I noticed a similar shared sense of humor when I used My Name is Seepeetza as a vehicle for discussion of the residential school period in Canada with Indigenous adults. One of the participants in that research (van der Wey, 2002), Brian, had repeatedly cracked witticisms in his quest to dispel colonial myths, causing the group to break into gales of laughter over and over again. His antics prompted the recollection and sharing of memories for everyone in the group, insider humor that I doubt would be grasped by non-Indigenous people. These individuals, I argue, like the graduate cohort members, felt safe in this "closed" environment to partake in such humor, to let their hair down, and would not have felt so free if outsiders had been in the room. In fact, the participants in my study made that point clear when we debriefed the whole experience of reading the novel. All participants emphasized the camaraderie they felt in being with others like themselves to share a novel about an historical period that had such a devastating impact on First Nations peoples.
Sessions such as this represented momentary breaks from the isolation that students, including Val, typically felt in mainstream university classrooms.

As a result of the isolation Val experienced in her early post secondary schooling and the transformation she experienced when she joined her Native Indian cohort, she felt it a natural step to take to join a First Nations cohort for her graduate program. Other factors contributed to Val’s transformation that I discuss in later sections on the roles of aboriginal instructors and affirming identity.

Noreen also spoke of having two sets of friends. She observed that when she is in more remote small town settings in close proximity to a reserve, members of the reserve are “kind of exclusive in a way. If you’re not a band member, you know you’re not a band member, right? (laughter) So, we’re not always invited to the community events.” In the urban center in which Noreen now-lives that is not a question – “If there is an Indian gathering you can just go.” That is an indicator of the comfort she seeks out and feels in being with other First Nations people, “of being accepted as Indian.” And she finds that comfort in her membership in the cohort.

Caring, fun and funny were also words that Liz used to describe the cohort. She added, “And, we’re all really cool women” as she erupted into laughter. And, “I just always look forward to having discussions and seeing what everyone’s been up to. (Laughter). And the sleepovers. And eating in Vietnamese restaurants. (More laughter).” Liz and a fellow cohort member shared a hotel room when they came into town monthly for weekend classes. They engaged in a series of rituals each time, one of which was having dinner at a favored Vietnamese restaurant. As did many of the other participants, they too participated in other First Nations gatherings, even going out of their way to do so on their own time.
“It’s Like Eating!”

For many participants cohort membership extended beyond the formal organization of their programs or the courses they took with other Indigenous people to include participation in Indigenous graduate student events, drop-in opportunities at cultural centers, and other forms of repeated communication including the development of on-line “community” with Indigenous graduate students and faculty. Based on how these participants viewed those events and opportunities for communication, I argue that such gathering places constitute another form of cohort membership. Whenever there was an opportunity for Indigenous peoples to gather, participants tended to go out of their way to be there. They sought out those people who made themselves available to offer support when it was needed, whatever the circumstances. For example, Hanna not only felt that she had benefited from taking a class with other First Nations students, she also spoke of the support of staff at an on-campus First Nations cultural center on an ongoing basis, support that sustained her and allowed her to complete her program expeditiously while she cared for her young family. She felt that such support truly represented another manifestation of cohortness and stated:

I had a lot of support from my family and on campus I had a lot of support from the cultural center. It doesn’t necessarily mean that I used them all the time but just to know that there was a group of people there that I could count on if things were getting really rough, and I was having a bad week because there were a lot of papers to be done and I just didn’t feel like being there any more. I knew I could just go and talk to somebody there and they would encourage and support me, and make me feel really good. (Hanna’s interview, April 19, 2003)

Margaret considered the on-line network that she established with a nation wide Aboriginal student organization across Canada to be another form of cohort, although there have been few, if any, face to face interactions. That organization was set up on campuses to
provide cultural, spiritual, physical, and academic support to students. A cyber community was created to seek input from students about the work that was being done on their behalf. Using staff input as a means to reach students, Margaret developed a survey to gather data about students and now communicates with both staff and students at various campuses throughout Canada.

The interest in the network has burgeoned as it serves to break down the barriers to communication caused by geographic isolation and limited financial resources. Further, Margaret felt that communicating through cyberspace had another appeal in that there was a concerted effort to maintain anonymity, to ensure that staff did not reveal the institutions students came from or reveal too much about the backgrounds of the students' served, unless the students themselves wished to do so. Accordingly, Margaret reported on students by region rather than institution. Margaret explained with a concrete example:

In one question I had listed all the First Nations groups in Canada as coherently as I could and then asked them to check which groups were present, or which groups they had serviced. I just used that as a general descriptor and also as a way of increasing awareness about the different types of groups in Canada. I guess probably too it was just based on my own experience. Back at [her former university] it was blind, pretty narrow in terms of who was First Nations. I wanted people to think about when they read this survey, “My God, we could actually have a [name of First Nation] student in B. C. from [another part of Canada], so we should make sure that they are appreciated and valued, and not marginalized because they're not from B. C.” (Margaret’s interview, March 31, 2003)

Clearly Margaret had experienced marginalization herself with respect to her own “Nativeness” and one motivation for creating this on-line cohort was to be a part of building “a sense of community” for and with Indigenous students from disparate regions of the country. Those efforts seem to be paying dividends as the network is gaining increasing visibility, and dialogue is taking place on a national level about the work they are doing to support Indigenous students in Canada. Creating an atmosphere of inclusion, increasing
visibility and creating conditions for on-going dialogue among members of varying background are characteristics of, I argue, what cohort membership ought to be about regardless of the format.

First Nations academic gatherings offer another location for First Nations students and faculty to connect, exchange ideas and socialize on a semi-regular basis if they choose to do so. These are another manifestation of cohortness. Such gatherings may be fairly large in scope as in Indigenous symposia, or less formal monthly or bi-monthly get-togethers where students share food, provide updates on their work, and perhaps engage in academic workshops based on articulated student needs. Regular gatherings such as these are similar to those held at Auckland University with Maori graduate students from across New Zealand (Smith, 2002). Regardless of the format, formal or informal, regardless of the inconvenience in terms of travel time, geographic distance, or need to alter other plans, many students choose to participate in such gatherings.

For example, Alice got up in the wee hours of the morning to travel to the city where an Indigenous symposium was being held, and then rushed off to return for a family gathering that evening. Her travel time that day was about 9 hours. As eight of my thirteen research participants had been in attendance at that symposium, which took place shortly before I began my follow-up interviews, I asked them to reflect on their motivation for taking part. I had had a significant role in organizing the event, my research participants were all aware of that, and their responses must be considered in that light. And yet the strength of the women’s responses and the passion with which they spoke suggested to me that they had reflected deeply on the event prior to my asking about it and that my dual role (researcher and event co-organizer) likely had little impact on their responses. Respondents offered
comments about the event that included how helpful it was to their own evolving work to hear about what other Indigenous students were researching and writing about, and about the challenges, problem solving, and celebrations others had experienced or were experiencing along the way. Others relished the opportunity to hear and speak to an important Indigenous scholar, in this case Chickasaw scholar Eber Hampton. Eber’s accessibility made him something of a role model in that students felt they had similar goals to aspire to, and that they could likely one day complete a PhD. Val relished having the time to stop and share in the midst of sometimes-frenzied lives, and being exposed to Indigenous scholars on a more global level, given that participants had affiliations that included Maori, Hawaiian, Sami, Native American, and First Nations. She explained:

The reason why I would want to is because even in this narrow corner of Indigenous education there is a broad spectrum of “stuff” going on. Like in my group, Uma [a PhD student] was in my group, and listening to her stories about [names geographic area where she is from] that I will probably never see, brought me to this place, but it’s an Indigenous place, and that’s what I mean by “broad spectrum of things that are going on.” I would never have known that about [Uma] and I see her around. Just the opportunity to listen more closely to people and where they are coming from, like Mark [another PhD student] - I get to see him. What do I know? He’s always so busy, and I’m always so busy; you don’t get a chance to listen to what his work is about. (Val’s follow-up interview, February 11, 2003)

Val added that she had been touched emotionally by several observations of peers and Indigenous faculty, again emphasizing the importance of being comfortable revealing emotional responses in public forums, and the importance of feeling that you’re not in this alone:

It was so rewarding to . . . .Like at the end when Graham [Maori scholar Graham Smith] talked and he said he gets so emotional about seeing graduate students. That made me so proud that he acknowledged all of us and it just made me so proud to be an Aboriginal graduate student. I haven’t stopped to do that, to say, “Wow, way to go!” . . . .Yeah, I was very touched by that, and also I guess with my group because I’m fairly attached to my cohort now, and whenever we go out I think of this group that has been, not sheltered, but to ourselves, and it’s like a coming out. Even in the
summer time when we got to come here to the Longhouse [for a conference presentation] and I saw Lori and she got all showered and she put her hair back and she put makeup and she dressed up. And I just think like, that's healthy to just step out a bit, to just step out from our little sheltered area a bit and take the next step in seeing who we are. So that was really touching to, to see four of us there [from her graduate cohort] – To look at Maryanne and see how confident she is. (Val’s follow-up interview, April 2, 2003)

Martha felt a great deal of comfort at being in this environment surrounded by Indigenous scholars from all over British Columbia. In her roundtable discussions she felt safe, nourished and included, despite having completed her Master’s program some years ago. She went on:

It’s challenging me to look at where I’ve been and to contribute to people who are in the places where I was a few years ago. Coming together to be nurtured again. Because in most non-Native institutions I personally feel excluded. My voice is not important. I want to go where I’ll feel safe. The symposium was a safe place. I know that when you’re with First Nations people you’re going to be accepted for who you are, whether you say anything or not. You don’t have to measure up to anybody’s standards. You just have to be who you are. (Martha’s interview, April 14, 2003)

Liz used the metaphor of eating to explain her reaction to the day, of having had the opportunity to talk with people as excited, passionate, and committed as she is about her work:

It’s like eating. It’s like you’re hungry for that. Once you enter into the world of reading about what Aboriginal people think, it’s like you’re in this world that hardly anybody is in. Not many Aboriginal people are in that world. The people that you work with, they’re not in that world; they don’t think that way. They are going along with colonization and that way of thinking, a kind of narrow way of thinking. And then when you read works by Eber Hampton and Marie Battiste it opens your eyes to this different way of thinking and then you realize that there aren’t very many people who think that way or write about this. And how can you grow if you don’t talk to other people? How can you continue to grow with what you know?

Because after a while it’s not very satisfying, it’s like eating junk food. And this is the real food that provides you with nourishment. But the other writers -who don’t have a deep understanding of Aboriginal people and history and culture and how there has been a history of colonization and how that affects people and how we’ve come to this point where we are now, and what do we need to do to change things for the better for us and for our children – then you just can’t read superficial things because you know
that those are not going to address the very complex needs that there are in our communities. It’s just not going to do it, so you have to go to people who have a real grounding in their education or it’s not going to lead you anywhere, you’re not going to know what to do as a teacher, as a leader. How can you lead if you don’t know where to go? (Liz’s follow-up interview, March 28, 2003)

The most salient aspects of participation in Indigenous gatherings as they relate to the notion of “cohortness“ include drop-in sessions or meetings at cultural centers, formal gatherings such as Indigenous symposia, and other gatherings that are less formal yet educational. They are scholarly nonetheless, and are organized with specific purposes that include, for example workshops on how to effectively use educational computer programs. Such manifestations of cohort membership are more fluid in nature than the open cohorts defined earlier, both in terms of the structure of the cohort, and the changing faces of the students who attend these events; that is, the students who turn up are not always the same, but they are familiar. A significant motivator of cohort membership, regardless of the format, is the desire for students to have their identity as First Nations people affirmed within academia.

“I’m a little more Native than I thought”: Affirming First Nations Identity

John Searles believes that one of the chief aims of education is to instruct individuals to forget about their ethnicity, social class, and all they were born into. He suggests that membership in the university means membership in “a universal human culture” (2003, p.7). Race, he adds, is irrelevant to intellectual development. However, students and faculty from minority groups see it differently. A Native American student argued in the video “Shattering the Silences” (1997) that he cannot appreciate a White man, Black man or Latino American if he does not know who he himself is. And he gets this deepening sense of knowing who he is from ethnic studies. Tatum (2004), whose scholarly lens has focused on
the development of racial identity, suggests that college choice is a reflection of identity—“how you see yourself, who you are now, and who you hope to become” (p.2). Students are drawn to places where they see themselves reflected in powerful ways, where they are perceived as central to the educational enterprise. Spelman College, a historically Black university, is one of those places. Some students who are members of First Nations cohorts see their membership in much the same way. Mary reflected on how her earlier First Nations teacher education cohort experience influenced her identity as a First Nations woman:

There were a variety of people coming who were attending that program, some who had never known themselves as being native. I consider myself ‘semi’ because I understand where I come from and I have a good sense of it but I don’t live it traditionally like some people do . . . . So with that sharing within that group you got a sense of who you were too. I started to realize, I am a little more native than I thought because you heard the experiences of other people. (Mary’s interview, Feb. 28, 2003)

Jill too had struggled much of her life with her identity as a First Nations woman. Through her graduate studies program she had come to realize how much she had previously accepted without question mainstream society’s portrayal of the history of First Nations people. Her life and the impact of colonization on it was simply a given, it was just a way of being. By moving into post secondary studies and ultimately her closed graduate cohort she began to examine the colonization process in some depth. That prompted her to begin to question the whole process, to ask—‘What can we do about this? How can we gain greater voice to rectify the effects of colonization with future generations and those we have an impact on in educational settings?’ But first, Jill said, “I had to learn about myself, I had to learn about my history in order to step back and look at it and analyze where I am at and who I am.” As a result of having come into the cohort Jill had come to recognize “how important it is to have First Nations content in any educational setting whether it be just First Nations
[classrooms] or whether it be mainstream. And I find it even more so for mainstream.” She went on to suggest that learning about Aboriginal knowledge and teachings and coming to understand the impact of the residential school era, for example, would help non-First Nations people understand First Nations people. In the process, this knowledge may have a positive impact on them in dealing with racist attitudes and racism issues.

Martha, who had had experiences in two open cohorts, revealed how important it was to her that her university surroundings were reflective of her identity, that her people were reflected in powerful ways. In mainstream classes she had felt differently:

In the mainstream classes I remember, it’s something that I have to do to get through, whereas with First Nations courses and instructors it was a real pleasure. I wanted to be there, I wanted to be with my people, I wanted to be with First Nations instructors. I felt like I was connecting to my parents in a way that I had never connected to them before, and saw them through different eyes, and valued their work. What Indian school did was make me ashamed of my parents and our culture and our language. (Martha’s interview, April 14, 2003)

While Beverly acknowledged that all of the courses she took in her graduate program were useful to her, one course in First Nations education stood out for many reasons. No matter how good her other courses had been, there were cultural differences, there wasn’t a sense of standing together in a global community, and there wasn’t the sense of bonding that permeated the First Nation course, at least not to the same magnitude. As she recalled:

In my class with [name of instructor] there was that spiritual component, and that relationship to land, to geography, because we deliberately talked about geography and how we are so much a part of it. I’m from the mountains and the rivers. That’s where I’m from, that’s where I was born. My whole body, my whole being – that’s who I am, no matter where I am, no matter where I choose to be, that’s who I am. (Beverly’s interview, April, 11, 2003)

In one class that Margaret took she relished the acceptance she experienced among First Nations students despite not having grown up within “a traditional family” and not having the teachings that other First Nations students seemed to have. She had come into
the class with the attitude, “This is who I am, just accept me or don’t accept me. But this is it. This is all I can be and I’m not going to pretend to be something I’m not just to fit into someone’s perception.” As it turned out she discovered she had a greater grounding in First Nations knowledge than she had thought. That awareness and the students’ acceptance of her served to deepen her sense of identity as a First Nations woman. Margaret also emphasized the significant role of the instructor in setting the tone in that class. Tatum (2004) suggested earlier that college choice is a reflection of identity and insisted that students are drawn to places where they see themselves reflected in powerful ways. That means they must see Indigenous people in positions of power, and they must perceive Indigenous instructors as strong role models and as mentors.

Many students made reference to the impact of having Aboriginal instructors in their program. Some participants had not had the experience before their graduate program, while others had in their undergraduate cohort. None had had an Indigenous instructor during grade school. Not surprisingly, some were positively effusive in their response to this new experience. Beverly spoke of one Indigenous instructor who had a powerful influence on her graduate studies:

So his teaching is really loaded with stuff. Everything that he says and everything that he presents has special significance in some form or another. I would say that it was exciting to go to that class every week. It was a sanctuary. People would say, “Thank God I get to come here.” A lot of us had stuff going on and the people in the class needed support and the people in the course were there . . . . I would say that that course is the highlight of my graduate studies. (Beverly’s interview, April 11, 2003)

Jill had been apprehensive at the notion of engaging in graduate studies and was in awe to find instructors she could relate to and who could simultaneously facilitate her intellectual growth. She shared her reaction to her first Indigenous instructor:
I really appreciate that the supervisor who has given all these instructors who have shared with us in their courses, that have given us something as well. When I was first accepted I was again apprehensive of coming in, wondering how it was going to be . . . I guess a fear. But when I took my first class, it was almost like disbelief that I could have somebody that I could relate to and that was so supportive and encouraging, but I was still learning, and I was getting the message, you know as far as education. (Jill’s interview, February 8, 2003)

Val recalled having two First Nations guest presenters in two college courses she took. Looking back on those experiences now made her realize that never before had she seen First Nations people represented in positions of power in education, and she thought it reflected well on her non-First Nations instructors. She doesn’t remember the content of their presentations, only her reaction to their presence. When Val read the transcript of her initial interview where she first spoke of those memories she was taken aback by the power of those two experiences and what it said about conditions of the not too distant past. She stated:

Yeah, I was going, “Wow.” Who would have thought that would have mattered but in fact I was in my twenties at that time and to not ever be represented? I know in the discourse you always read about that, right? That people need to be represented and there needs to be more representation in the curriculum, in books and in movies, or whatever. And we say these things but they seem to be just said things. You go yeah, yeah, yeah, that should be so, but then when you say it and you look at it, you go, “But I was in my early twenties. That’s not really very long ago. It wasn’t like a hundred years ago or something!” (Val’s follow-up interview, March 19, 2003)

Liz, on the other hand, without hesitation listed off nine Aboriginal instructors she had had through her undergraduate and graduate programs, adding the comment, “So that’s pretty good, I think!” In some cases she could provide some detail about their area of expertise, which in itself was telling about the impact the individuals had had on her life, given that she had completed her first degree in the eighties. There was no question that Liz saw having Aboriginal instructors as a significant, gratifying feature of her membership in both cohorts. Her tone was matter of fact in making that point:
Well it was having instructors who are Aboriginal, because before that in all my years in secondary school or elementary school I never had any instructor that was like me. So right away that was very gratifying to have so many instructors who had similar experiences to you and have brought a different perspective that you would not have normally got in a classroom . . . And it was very affirming about who we are and the knowledge that we have and the Aboriginal perspectives that we have about education and everything else that we’re learning in the undergrad and graduate work. (Liz’s interview, February 26, 2003)

She added, “When you’re not with the group of people you feel like . . . where are they? Because you have all these ideas and they’re not affirmed by anyone; there’s no people that say, ‘Oh yeah, yeah, I know what you mean!’ It’s always like, ‘Well, what do you mean?’” (Laughter)

Other participants shared similar views about having Indigenous instructors in general, and others mentioned particular individuals who stood out for them. Invariably the perceived qualities included being a strong voice for First Nations knowledge, culture and history. The expression “good role model” was used frequently. Beverly, for example, credits one of her Indigenous instructors with having a major influence on shaping her as a teacher; she now recognizes similar patterns in her teaching approach.

Role models and mentors don’t necessarily have to be Indigenous faculty members. Hanna, for example, credited the various First Nations administrators, program coordinators, and secretaries, whose offices are housed at the on-campus cultural center, along with faculty members, for providing her with the support she needed to complete her graduate degree. When she felt the need for support she knew she could always go to the cultural center and find someone willing to listen.

Another participant also noted how much she valued the visibility of Indigenous faculty and the mentorship that some provide. She shared a story of how she had made the decision, as a young student, to transfer to a university in a different province after the first
year of her undergraduate degree. She was experiencing trouble and frustration getting into her courses, and feeling quite isolated. By chance she was sitting in an office and a First Nations faculty member she had met once when he was visiting at her previous university walked in. She thought,

“Oh, my gosh!” Just to know somebody that knew me, just to have that contact. And that’s how our friendship sort of started from there, for me to go to his office and just talk about whatever. He was happy to take the time to do that and that really helped. (Susan’s interview, April 12, 2003)

She added that at her current university just having Native professors around, being in some classes with a lot of Native students in her current open cohort program, and going “to gatherings where other Native students from various academic settings get together, has been nothing but positive.” In short, her current university choice is much more of a reflection of her First Nations identity than anything she has experienced before. She is nourished by the experience, and there are some places, at least, where she sees herself reflected in powerful ways.

**Chapter Summary**

According to my research participants, there are many benefits to First Nations graduate cohort membership. Participants in both open and closed cohorts generally tended to feel an intrinsic connection to other cohort members. Many found it freeing to not be expected to explain themselves as First Nations women, to not have to be the resident First Nations expert, and to not have to provide extensive context before beginning discussion of issues. And it was much easier to share oneself in a cohort if the atmosphere was perceived to be generative, and creative, and contributed to learning, an atmosphere most had not experienced in mainstream educational environments. To describe the cohort as a “sanctuary,” as one participant did, is to suggest it was a safe space, for some a spiritual
space of connectedness and bonding, similar to those described by Keating (2002) and Verney (2004), a place that allowed students to not only survive the often times harsh world of academia, but a place where they could just be First Nations.

Participants supported my argument that insider humor is used judiciously as a means of diffusing tension and as a form of resistance to the devastating and ongoing effects of colonization. Embedded in insider humor is an implicit understanding of Indian ways of being and knowing that creates a sense of comfort, if only on a temporary basis. And that understanding of being and knowing transcends most differences of nation of origin. For example, in book jacket critiques of two of Spokane writer Sherman Alexie’s collections of short stories, Laguno/Pueblo novelist Leslie Marmon Silko (2003, 1993) comments specifically and exclusively on his liberal use of humor, humor that I consider to be “insider humor.” Clearly, Silko sees Alexie’s use of humor as central to his work. Interestingly, New York Times book reviewer Eric Weinberger (2003), in his review of Alexie’s (2003) latest collection, Ten Little Indians: Off the Reservation makes no reference to the numerous humorous anecdotes that permeate the collection and there is no sense of “knowing” about the basketball metaphors that Alexie uses repeatedly. But then, he should not be expected to “get it”, as that is what insider humor and knowing are about.

Indigenous gatherings represented another manifestation of open cohort membership. Participants viewed these locations as places to share ideas, problem solve, and support others involved in Indigenous education. Indigenous symposia, for example, provided spaces for the works of Indigenous scholars to be highlighted, scholars who are also seen as role models. Attendance at these events offered the opportunity for participants to engage with like-minded and committed scholars from other institutions, or parts of the province, country,
Participants were in a position to engage in discussion of mutually relevant and stimulating topics, and to raise the bar on personal and intellectual growth with others who were ready and able to address the complex needs of Indigenous communities. For some, these gatherings simply provided a chance to mingle with others beyond one’s primary cohort, to simply engage socially as Teitel (1997) recommended.

Regardless of the motivation for participation in Indigenous gatherings, participants increased their mutually supportive networks with other Indigenous graduate students and faculty. Participants clearly felt that they benefited greatly from the collaborative, consultative, mutually supportive, highly contextualized and relevant atmosphere that marks these Indigenous gatherings. The importance of these gatherings cannot be minimized in terms of the contribution they make to the goal of greater retention of Indigenous students in graduate programs. An increased sense of belonging and personal growth are outcomes of such participation as found by Heimbecker et al (2000) in their analysis of the RAISE program in Arizona. Although participation in Indigenous gatherings, particularly with respect to symposia, may not fit the commonly used definition of the phrase “open cohort” because they are more fluid in nature, I argue that in Indigenous contexts, at least, these gatherings are significant manifestations of open cohort membership. Although participants may be simultaneously taking courses with other members it is not a requirement. Interacting with students from a range of disciplines is viewed positively as it is the more global Indigenous issues that are in common. However, if students do happen to be registered in a course or courses together, participation in these gatherings may decrease some of the disadvantages that are often an aspect of more traditional open cohorts; for example, being cast in a particular role.
For many participants, graduate cohort membership represented a place where members could reclaim their sense of identity as First Nations women, enabling them to engage with the world with a much stronger sense of self. Within their cohorts, frustrations and experiences might be shared without concern that they might be offending white students or where they would feel responsible for taking care of them. As Tatum (2004) pointed out, college choice, and, I suggest, program choice, is a reflection of identity. Opportunities must be created for students to gather with other Indigenous students and instructors in classes or situations where they may be supported in quests to challenge the teaching of a cultural canon that does not consider an Indigenous perspective. Research participants also recognize that not daring to challenge such a canon contributes to the perpetuation of misinformation or partial stories about Aboriginal history, knowledge and ways of being.

Reclaiming a strong sense of First Nations identity may mean feeling pride in connecting to parents and ancestors where once that may have been a source of shame. The search may lead to bonding with others seeking similar affirmation of identity in a global community, connection that is more often than not absent from mainstream classrooms. Cohort membership means the realization for some that they have a greater grounding in First Nations knowledge than they had thought. But affirmation of identity does not just happen through formation of a cohort space. It must be facilitated and nurtured by committed First Nations instructors and other members with common goals. Based on the significant number of women who spoke about the impact of having Indigenous instructors, I argue that their role is intertwined with and integral to students' First Nations identity being affirmed in academia. Having Indigenous instructors visible in numbers and stature is one way that students may see themselves reflected in powerful ways (Tatum, 2004). However,
for some research participants, coming to terms with their First Nations identity has been a complex and challenging process. I discuss those struggles in the next chapter.
CHAPTER FIVE:
CHALLENGES OF COHORT MEMBERSHIP

Introduction

In any group of people who meet regularly over a period of time it is highly likely that there will be differences, regardless of the thread that drew them together. And of course, differences will vary according to the makeup of the group and the conditions under which they meet, including, for example, the frequency and duration of the times spent together. Membership in a First Nations cohort is no different. In this chapter I will discuss and analyze some of the differences that arose among members in both open and closed cohort settings and what participants perceived as drawbacks, shortcomings or tradeoffs of membership. Many participants have struggled with coming to terms with their First Nations identity, some continuing the struggle well into adulthood. I address these sensitive issues and argue that it is imperative to accept that perspectives, experiences, and perceptions of identity differ from individual to individual and must be seen as evolving, shifting, and multi-threaded. From there I explore the forms and impact of silencing both within the respective cohorts and within mainstream contexts and how those experiences have prompted some First Nations students to desire safety and separation. These forms of silencing include questioning others’ legitimacy as First Nations people, and not honoring the right of individuals to embrace differing beliefs about spirituality within cohorts. In cross-cultural contexts silencing of First Nations voices in classroom discourses or through strict adherence to a Western cultural canon are other forms. I close this chapter by arguing that regardless of the challenges that arise through cohort membership, success for First Nations students must not be achieved through tradeoffs including the silencing of aspects of individual identity, whether in open or closed cohorts.
**Fresh Ideas, Fresh Debate**

What one individual participant will perceive to be a drawback of cohort membership will not stand out as such for another. Perceptions differ for a host of reasons, including, for example, the duration, frequency and intensity of group sessions, personality differences, educational and lived experiences prior to entry into the cohort, expectation of what the cohort experience would be like prior to entry, and long-term goals.

An absence of lively debate among cohort members was a major issue for Sheila. She felt that, for a lot of reasons, being in a closed cohort had limited her master’s experience. When you have been together with the same group for two years, she suggested, the newness and excitement could dissipate and not be there, partly for lack of fresh faces and ideas. For the most part she felt cohort members had been unwilling to share their papers, their thoughts, and their ideas, stating that they weren’t feeling particularly courageous about opening themselves up to the feedback of others. She, on the other hand, was hungry for someone to read her work and challenge her ideas, something she had experienced in her undergraduate program. By the time she was finishing her Bachelor of Arts degree she was finding herself inviting debate with the words, “I would argue . . .” or “Others would argue . . .” and feeling intellectually stimulated and satisfied in those environments. In the graduate cohort she thought people stopped short of disagreeing with anything and wasn’t sure if that was attributable to a lack of ability to express why they didn’t agree with something or simply an unwillingness or discomfort with doing so. She speculated that the hesitancy of members to challenge the perspectives of others might be caused by a concern for the long-term impact on the relationships among cohort members. Sheila summarized her views stating:
So I'm looking forward to being outside of the cohort and sharing with new people. I like my cohort but generally I’ve wondered throughout the last year if maybe I wouldn’t have had a different experience if I wasn’t with the same class for the whole two years. Fresh ideas, fresh debate. I’m always looking to have my mind changed. I think that my ideas and my intellect is a work in progress and I’m always open to input. And I think that groups of people, as individuals, grow at different rates and I just think that... I won’t know, so I guess I have to do a PhD to find out. (Laughter) (Sheila’s interview, January 26, 2003)

Alice had a different opinion than Sheila. When asked what drawbacks there might be to membership in a closed cohort she responded, “I can’t think of any off hand. I mean, are we an insular group? I don’t think so.” Rather, she thought they had varied opinions. In fact, she added, “I can’t see that there are any drawbacks in having a cohort like this in dealing with Aboriginal education.”

Another drawback that Sheila noted was that roles were assigned very early in their program, in fact by the end of the first semester, roles that proved very difficult if not impossible to alter. For instance, one woman was considered to be the “keener” and everyone turned to her to expound on her ideas about readings or concepts, particularly if they were reading a particularly challenging piece. Another member was the spiritual one, and Sheila was cast as the storyteller. She pointed out that the practice was not about expertise, but labels, and those labels became an expectation. Val concurred with Sheila on this point. As she humorously described the practice, “If you’re pegged as cynical then it is really hard to go back and be positive... I don’t know, it’s just really hard. So I think it’s better to be positive first (Laughter), and then if you’re cynical, it’s just a surprise!”

Martha, who had been a member of two cohorts, could not think of any drawbacks to cohort membership, and Liz too initially stated that she had encountered no “roadblocks.” She did explain some of the challenges, though, while making clear that there were no situations she could not handle. During Liz’s third interview, after she had read and reflected
upon the transcript from her initial interview very carefully, she decided to speak about what
her role within her closed cohort had been. She began with the comment:

When I was reading this I wrote, “I successfully avoided answering your questions
about my role.” So I knew there was something that I was avoiding. It’s partly that
you’re not supposed to talk about yourself, or at least that’s how I was raised.
You’re not supposed to be overly . . . whatever that is. So you’re not supposed to say,
“Oh, I’m so smart, I’m so wonderful!” (Liz’s third interview, April 16, 2003)

And yet, she clearly felt that by discussing her role she could make an important
contribution to the discourse about Aboriginal worldviews and the construction and purpose
of First Nations cohorts such as hers. With that, Liz somewhat reluctantly described herself
as a leader, adding that others had recognized that quality in her as well. She attributed that
to having worked in many diverse jobs where she had taken on that role. Liz’s approach to
leadership, at least as she describes it, is clearly Indigenous and also seemingly follows
Glasser’s (1992) method of managing without coercion. It suggests that she employs lead
management strategies rather than boss management. For example, Liz believes she leads by
example, or through suggestion, as in “Let’s try this.” She explains,

like I said before, it’s not like I tell everybody what to do. Someone has to take some
initiative and say, “Let’s do this. Let’s try this.” But within the idea that you’re
saying, “Let’s try this,” you’re also asking them, “What do you think of this? What
could you see that you would bring to this?” And trying to coordinate the entire
group so that everybody contributes something, and that we’re all together in
whatever it is that we’re doing. (Liz’s follow-up interview, April 16, 2003)

Liz acknowledged that when engaging in group work it could be challenging to
remain sensitive to the needs of all in the group if you are pressed for time. For example, if
you have done your homework “and you know what you want to do and then there is
someone in there who wants to bring in all these other things that you don’t think are relevant
to the assignment, it’s harder to wait for them to come to the same understanding.” In those
instances she took a firmer stance. Liz was always aware that her evaluation was resting on
how others in her group were doing and she didn’t want to do poorly “because of having to wait for them to come to the same kind of understanding . . . . I think they appreciated that I did take the leadership and said, ‘This is what we should do.’”

Sharing the load of group projects equitably is a challenge whether one is in a cohort or otherwise. I asked Liz to explain her point of view, attitude and motivation for participating in group projects when she is aware that she is pulling much of the load, and that other group members are not necessarily as prepared, and may not be as far along the learning and understanding continuum as she is:

Well, that is what our Aboriginal communities are about; it’s working together. That is what Aboriginal education is about. It’s working in a group. You can’t be in Aboriginal education and think that you’re going to work as an individual, because if you’re going to work as an individual you’re not going to make a difference. (Liz’s third interview, April 16, 2003)

Liz explained that other people haven’t had the same privileges and opportunities that she has had, or, perhaps, the ability. Recognizing that, she sees her role as teacher, teaching those with less knowledge, taking them from where they are, and doing it with respect. She acknowledged that that isn’t always easy:

But it does get frustrating, where you do wish for more community, where you can talk about pedagogy without people being afraid of the word, or you can talk about colonization without having to provide a lot of background information, or to be able to talk about stereotyping, or to be able to talk about a specific cultural program and how you think it does more damage than good in the way that it’s approached. (Liz’s third interview, April 16, 2003).

Liz suggested that it is a risky business to be “critical of your own people and how they are teaching something, or that they’re teaching something badly, or that they are choosing to teach something and not other things.” Despite the frustrations, feelings of isolation, and longing for others who can do the work in moving toward a critical mass of
Indigenous educators who can effect real change for First Nations people, Liz remains optimistic. She is confident that there will be opportunities for “those conversations” when she returns to individuals at a later date and they have continued to grow and develop.

Not all may agree with Liz’s point of view about her role in particular groups or the cohort as a whole, or be willing to accept the tradeoff of a more intellectually stimulating environment that she might have found, at least in some classes, were she to have enrolled in an open cohort or mainstream program. Sheila, for example, made it clear that she had some regret about her decision to join a closed cohort. She longed for greater balance between a First Nations curricular and instructional approach, and opportunities for greater intellectual stimulation. Liz’s explanation does, however, provide some insight into an Indigenous worldview where there is an emphasis on community rather than individual goals. Barnett and Muse (1995) have suggested that one of the primary purposes of a cohort is the creation of a supportive learning environment where efforts are made to facilitate mutual learning; that is, an emphasis is placed on gains in the affective domain. While the importance of individual academic success is not minimized, it does not take precedence over group goals. Regardless, the issues that Liz and Sheila raise are issues that must be discussed and the respective goals of various cohorts made clear when cohorts are formed. Although participants did not refer to the complexity of the notion of First Nations identity as a drawback as such, many discussed their struggles in coming to terms with that aspect of how they see themselves. And for some, those different perspectives did impact on cohort dynamics.

“A Crisis of Legitimacy”: On Being “Indian Enough”

We cannot believe we must leave our beloved Crispus Attucks and go to schools in the white neighborhoods. We cannot imagine what it will be like to walk by the principal’s office and
see a man who will not know our name, who will not care about us. Already the grown-ups are saying it will be nothing but trouble, but they do not protest. Already we feel like the cattle in the stockyard near our house, herded, prodded, pushed. Already we prepare ourselves to go willingly to what will be a kind of slaughter, for parts of ourselves must be severed to make this integration of schools work. We start by leaving behind the pleasure we will feel in going to our all-black school, in seeing friends, in being a part of a school community.

(bell hooks, 1996, p.154)

As I tackle the topic of legitimacy I do so fully aware of the sensitivity of a First Nations person discussing the notion of being "Indian enough." Yet when First Nations women are grappling with the issue, indeed have taken risks themselves in speaking about it, I must address it. Margaret, for example, revealed her concerns with blood quantum issues earlier, while discussing cyberspace communication among First Nations students across Canada as another manifestation of cohort membership, and emphasized the value of anonymity within the organization. Like Margaret, the women who spoke on the topic are all at various stages of (re)claiming their sense of identity because of circumstances largely beyond their control. I think it important to acknowledge and honor those varying background experiences, recognizing that each is at a different stage of coming to know who they are with respect to their First Nations identity, of embracing and acknowledging the fluidity and flux of such a notion. This topic inevitably overlaps with the next section on the experiences of students being silenced within their varying cohort situations. Unless we recognize the impact of such unresolved issues, and move toward resolution, we contribute to the internalized oppression of our own people.

Graveline (1998) discusses the pressures placed on minority peoples to assimilate, to adjust to what she calls "the commonsense norms of White middle-class life" (1998, p.195), and argues for the need to resist through embracing cultural identity. hooks (1996) recalls what it was like to leave all-Black schools in the aftermath of the desegregation law imposed through Brown vs School Board in the mid-1950's, to leave friends, to not be a part of a
school community. As she recalled, some “smart” Blacks were “chosen” to sit with white students but the expectation was that “they wanted us to do something, to change, to make ourselves into carbon copies of them, so they can forget we are here, so that they can forget the injustice of their past. They are not prepared to change” (p.52). Similar arguments and perspectives abound in the publications of scholars on the margins of society yet often go unheeded by those located at the center (for example, James, 1999 and Pulera, 2002).

Participants in this research shared similar experiences of silencing (through denial of identity), and isolation in mainstream classrooms. They offer sound reasons to explain their desire for seeking membership in safer places such as cohorts. For example, one student spoke of the isolating experience of being the only First Nations student in her high school enriched English class. The implicit message was that she was “one of them,” invisible as a First Nations student, because she was “smart.” She recalled:

One of the ladies that works for the majority of the Native students came into the class and said, ‘I see there are no Native students in here.’ I was going to say something but then my friend Doug said, ‘Sure there is, Susan is in here!’ And she said, right in front of the class to everybody, ‘I don’t consider you Native.’” (Susan’s Interview, April 9, 2003).

Susan’s story is not unlike one Carl James (1999) shares in his book Seeing Ourselves: Exploring Race, Ethnicity, and Culture. One of his participants, a young woman of Jamaican Canadian and Métis ancestry, told of having a teacher say to her “We don’t have many of your kind around here” (p.34). The young woman remains uncertain about whether the teacher was being kind or rude about her “difference.” However, she added that many white people use the expression your kind to suggest separate and inferior. The support worker’s comment about Susan can be read as anything but a compliment. Rather, it seems to suggest an attempt by the support worker to remove Susan from the separate and inferior
view she has of other First Nations students because Susan is a good student and not like the stereotypical view she holds of First Nations people. In effect she seems to be bestowing what Thompson (1998) describes as "honorary whiteness" (p.524) on Susan.

Mary speaks of her evolving sense of identity as a First Nations woman and acknowledges that when she was younger she had her own stereotypes and misconceptions about being Native. She found it easier to be Native when she was on reserve, but much harder when off reserve among others. Even when mixing with other First Nations "it was hard to be Native." As a result of her studies of the past two years, where the content dealt with racism and identity, she finds an increasing distaste for the word "assimilation" because:

I feel like it affects whom I want to become and I feel it's another label on me if I'm going to be living down here [in the British Columbia lower mainland] doing what I need to do. I'm starting to see that our identities are evolving, our cultures are evolving and that we need to give some space there. And stop putting the label "you're assimilating," because I don't know what it means to not do it this way, not to be living in this context. (Mary's interview, February 28, 2003)

The notion of assimilation was rendered a little more troubling for Mary because she was the only one in her closed cohort who, as she expressed it, was "not working with my people." She felt different because she didn't have the shared experience of doing what the other women did. When they discussed assimilation she felt defensive and thought that they were defining the word in their own terms. Mary's uncle, a prominent British Columbia First Nations leader, provided some advice when she was young and his words have continued to resonate with her, helping her come to terms with her First Nations identity while living in two worlds. "He would say, 'Take the best from both cultures' and never explain what he meant." Mary is convinced that if he hadn't said that "she would have been stuck." She had gone to residential school where she was "always being told what to do, whom to be, how to breathe." He gave her permission to go ahead and explore the world, to find out for herself
who she is and that is exactly what she has done. She has asked herself, what does it mean to “Keep the doors open,” “Give them opportunities,” with reference to raising our children? To her it means listening to their thinking and empowering them to be contributors to decisions that affect them instead of saying, “Oh, no, no, no. To be [name of nation] you have to do this. To be [name of nation] you have to do that. I get that still but I’m more mature now and I can usually ignore it. But when you’re younger . . . .”

Like Mary, Doreen has wrestled with coming to terms with her Métis identity. In fact, she had ignored that aspect of her identity for much of her life because she had not been very proud of what First Nations people stood for. She didn’t deny her identity, but she didn’t advertise it either. And all through her undergraduate degree Doreen didn’t see reflections of First Nations people in the academy. Her current graduate work is “just so much more like coming home,” it represents an opportunity to try to understand who she is, where she is from, and how she can be a Canadian Aboriginal scholar.

One event in particular had been the catalyst for Doreen’s exploration of her Aboriginal roots. Quite by accident while at a women’s conference she had stumbled upon an important poetry session. All of the women read their poetry, including Jeannette Armstrong, Lee Maracle, and Chrystos, along with other prominent writers. Doreen admitted that prior to that she had not known such authors, and that such works existed. As she recalled, “I remember physically sitting there and feeling so relieved. This is the first time I can imagine my mother would be comfortable in any of this. Now my mother would never be comfortable in an academic setting, but this is something that would make sense. And it did make sense.” The impact of that session was so great that the readings were indelibly
burned in Doreen’s mind. She added, “It was really a feeling that it was time to make some more connections in my aspirations as a scholar and to make connections to my family, my ancestry, who I think I am, that whole little creation drama that we partake in.”

The incident when Doreen first discovered that First Nations people write and publish occurred as her BA program was drawing to a close. Although she wanted to pursue a master’s degree in Aboriginal literature, it was impossible. At the universities she was in a position to apply to there wasn’t a First Nations course to be had, particularly in literature, nor the First Nations faculty to teach them. In other words, First Nations people were not at all reflected in positions of power within those institutions, and most particularly not in English departments, and were not at all perceived as central to the educational enterprise (Tatum, 2004).

Although Doreen is clearly passionate about her current work, which provides space for her to explore her First Nations identity, she made it clear that her “personal life story is defined by many things,” not just her ethnicity. She talks about how complicated our lives are, including our notions of identity. She has mixed feelings about identifying herself as First Nations given, as she says:

I’ve had a lot of good luck in my life and maybe I shouldn’t be identifying myself as First Nations. I’m not status, for instance. I’m not all of those kinds of things. I guess I’ve started to recognize, in some ways, the oppression of that; the responsibility in some ways, to recognize that within yourself, to identify yourself that publicly because that is the only way that there is going to be a public face, certainly in English. (Doreen’s interview, April 16, 2003)

Doreen recognizes that English departments are traditionally very conservative, and while there are some “great profs who are socially responsible, social responsibility is not a theme in English departments.” According to Doreen, English literature is a difficult field to break into, most particularly at the PhD level. To do so requires a fair bit of capital as there
don't seem to be the same grant opportunities as for other programs. People who identify themselves as First Nations and enter English departments often come from backgrounds of privilege; that is, they come from families that are fairly well off financially or they are of "mixed" heritage, meaning part white, and their ethnicity is not readily apparent, making access to study and research more likely. At least that is the climate that Doreen believes is typical in English Departments.

That awareness of "difference" contributes to the hesitancy of such individuals to identify as Aboriginal and to identify with other First Nations students. For example, a peer in Doreen's department, who, like Doreen, is of bi-racial heritage, shared her apprehension about identifying herself as First Nations at the university's cultural center "because she always thought somebody was going to ask her for her status card."

Doreen told of another literary scholar who is vigilant about not ever leaving the impression that he was raised in an Aboriginal environment lest Aboriginal readers question his authenticity. In sharing that with me Doreen asked rhetorically, "Well, what's an Aboriginal environment?" She questions the expectation to "perform your ethnicity," to fit into the stereotype that "if you didn't sit at your grandmother's knee learning, then somehow you are not legitimate. And so there is a crisis of legitimacy as far as identity is concerned." Doreen recognizes that some people are more confident about their First Nations identity, farther along the continuum, or "just more stable in themselves" and therefore more welcoming to those who are not as secure in their First Nations identity. She is clearly among those who are not, at least not yet. She adds, "And then I could recognize some of us looking at each other, wondering, 'Are we allowed in?' or, 'Is this okay?' or 'Here, let me tell you my life story and you can tell me if I'm allowed to come in.'" Over time Doreen is
coming to terms with this struggle, deciding to just let it go. She knows she is privileged and that few First Nations people have the opportunities she has had. She accepts that issues of identity are complicated.

Thomas King’s analysis is helpful in analyzing and ultimately supporting Doreen’s viewpoint about authenticity. He suggests that “authenticity can be a slippery and limiting term when applied to Native literature for it suggests cultural and political boundaries past which we should not let our writing wander” (p.xv). He adds that to stay within those boundaries requires us to deal with the concept of “Indian-ness,” a nebulous term that implies that there is a set of expectations to demarcate what is Indian and what is not.

Other research participants, whether members of closed or open cohorts, also shared stories about struggles with their First Nations identity, for example, with accepting their “Nativeness” or dealing with accusations (implied or overtly stated) of being “too white”. At times, under specific circumstances, these tensions were fueled within their respective cohorts. One student observed that the dynamics of First Nations classes varied depending on the tone set by the instructor, and the ratio of Indigenous students to non-Indigenous students in the class. Students who had been affirming in one context were less so in another. In the first context the instructor had been instrumental in discouraging talk about blood quantum, looks, acceptance, and about what counted as being First Nations and what didn’t. She made it clear that she wanted to create an environment where everyone was welcome although it was clear that there were individuals in the class who held strong feelings about the importance of that measuring stick. That wasn’t the case in another context. As Margaret worded it, “That [a tone of affirmation and acceptance] didn’t exist in that class. Sometimes you felt like, ‘I’m not from this place. I don’t even have my ID card to verify that this is what
I am. ‘So I thought, ‘Just shut up. Don’t say anything.’’” She went on to acknowledge that it is she who is struggling with laying claim to her First Nations identity and that she is slowly moving toward a greater sense of pride with that strand of her identity. In her words:

And maybe it’s my own anxiety playing out, there was more of a . . . you’ve got to wear it as a badge of honor if you’re First Nations. Be there, be proud, and take over the world. I don’t know that I felt that comfortable yet with taking that space. Partially too it’s because I don’t want to be solely known as a First Nations person. There’s a lot more to me than that. It’s a very important part of me, but it’s not the only part. (Margaret’s interview, March 31, 2003)

Noreen, who has a fair complexion, shared how she felt rebuffed when other students in her [undergraduate First Nations] cohort dismissed her as “too white.” Clearly, she was speaking of more than skin color:

Well, when I first joined [the undergraduate First Nations program] I was 25 and that was my first experience of being with a group of other Aboriginal people. That was like a cohort and previous to that I hadn’t had much interactions [with First Nations people] besides with my family because I had left residential school when I was 12, and from 12 to 25 I really had nothing do with Aboriginal people and that was largely because of the self hatred that was passed on in the schools. And so just before I went into [the program] I was starting to look at my identity and to, for the first time in my life see First Nations people as beautiful people . . . so it was really a bit of a culture clash.

There were about 15 of us and most of them lived with their grandmas in their communities and I was accused of being “too white”, a few times. The first time I felt like I was kicked in the stomach and it was like “How could you say that?” Because I didn’t have the opportunity to grow up in my community so I felt like I was really being chastised for that. So that was my [earlier First Nations cohort] experience. On the other hand, at that time I was also really starting to appreciate my Nativeness, of being native for the first time in my life. And in some of the research I was doing I noticed that I was learning about Kwagulth people, of Salish people; I was really looking for my parents in those books. (Noreen’s interview, January 22, 2003)

Noreen also spoke of the difficulty of being caught between two worlds, as did Mary earlier, given her own white foster home upbringing and the fact that her children have a white father. When Noreen began learning about the history of First Nations people in
Canada in anthropology courses she went through a period of being very angry with white people. She only came to recognize the impact of her sweeping generalizations when her daughter called her on it. Greg Sarris (1993), whose mother was white, wrote about his uneasiness when his Native American relatives discussed whites in a derogatory way, and Noreen’s daughter reacted in a similar manner when she denigrated white people. Noreen recalled the vehemence of her daughter’s response, of how hurtful she found it to have her father spoken of in such negative ways because of his skin color. That exchange affected Noreen’s behavior and attitude with respect to racial difference. Also, because she is following a much more spiritual path now, in a manner similar to how Verney (2004) and Keating (2002) describe it, she is even more committed to contributing to a greater atmosphere of inclusion and connectedness among all people of all races whatever the context might be. And that, in turn, has influenced how she assesses her recent closed graduate cohort membership, where, she said, she had felt excluded and isolated on many occasions, indeed had commented to trusted individuals in the cohort that “I’ve never felt my white skin so much as I have been here.” Noreen remains torn about her overall assessment of this closed graduate cohort experience:

It’s been very mixed because I like to be . . . to see everyone as one in the world. You know sometimes if you’re separating the First Nations people from . . . it’s sort of like a special thing, I find that I’m really torn about that sometimes. . . . I guess because I don’t go around thinking of myself that I’m this Aboriginal woman. That’s not my whole being; it’s just a small part of my being. And I didn’t grow up with my parents or in my community and I’ve gone through a lot of experiences . . . a lot of put downs, a lot of pain over it. And I’m trying to come to terms with what my role is as a mother, as a grandmother, and as a person. (Noreen’s interview, January 22, 2003)

Struggles such as those I have discussed are common among those engaging in (re)claiming aspects of their First Nations identity. Rather than dismissing those perspectives and struggles, I argue that it would be more productive to honor them. We must place far
less emphasis on issues of blood-quantum and judgments about upbringing. Instead we must place greater emphasis on creating conditions for embracing those whose desire is to make connections to family and ancestry, and who genuinely wish to contribute to creating conditions for greater First Nations students’ success, whether within academic institutions or otherwise. Together we must avoid contributing to the internalized oppression of our own people where we unintentionally perpetuate the work of the colonizers.

In making this argument my intent is not to minimize the significance of the stories of pain, isolation and mistrust that participants have shared, including those who have wrestled with coming to a place of comfort with their First Nations identity. It is quite the contrary. All have expressed a desire for community, a desire to be known and understood given the complexities of their varied lived experiences in the face of great pressure by the dominant society to assimilate them or their parents, as hooks (1996) and Graveline (1998) alluded to in the quotation at the beginning of this chapter. Many participants expressed a desire to strengthen their cultural identity as First Nations women while being free to “take the best of both worlds” as Mary’s uncle advised her to do. The decisions need not be an all or nothing choice. Being more cognizant of when and how we silence each other within First Nations closed or open cohorts, and of when we are silenced or choose to be silent in mainstream contexts will also serve to reduce the incidences where we contribute to our own oppression. In the process we will thereby render our cohorts safer, more caring, nurturing, self-empowering spaces.

Before moving on to discussions of silencing I return to the bell hooks’ (1996) quotation that opened this section, and her memory of what it was like to leave her beloved school, Crispus Attucks, of what it was like to leave behind the pleasure felt in going to an
all-black school, to be a part of a school community. That was hooks’ story about a way of being. We all have our own stories about what it is to be “First Nations,” our own memories, our own definitions. Susan described her years growing up in the boreal forest with Elders, family connections and “A lot of community members” as the best years of her life, despite what others might consider hardships. As she added, “That’s who I am, from there.” In cohorts, whether open or closed, we must honor the stories that helped shape individuals’ evolving sense of First Nations identity; in fact celebrate them, while appreciating that they contribute to an enriched milieu from which we may all benefit rather than concerning ourselves with whether we or others are “Indian enough.”

**Silenced Within Multiple Contexts**

The root of the word “oppression” is the element “press.” *The press of the crowd; pressed into military service; to press a pair of pants; printing press; press the button.* Presses are used to mold things or flatten them or reduce them in bulk, sometimes to reduce them by squeezing out the gases or liquids in them. Something pressed is something caught between or among forces and barriers, which are so related to each other that jointly they restrain, restrict or prevent the thing’s motion or mobility. Mold. Immobilize. Reduce. (Marilyn Frye, 1983)

**Silenced Within the cohort**

To discuss and analyze events and aspects of membership in your own cohort can be a risky business. In many ways it is like discussing the dirty laundry in one’s family. Whenever topics came up in interviews that might be perceived to be controversial, participants appeared to think deeply before responding. Clearly they were conscious of the potential ramifications of discussing sensitive issues, but by choosing to speak they were indicating a desire to contribute to effecting positive change and to making First Nations cohorts safer places to speak, safer places to be. Discussing the notion of silencing within the cohorts ranks as one of those sensitive issues. In this section I will focus on incidents of
silencing that were not as distinctly identity based, although there may be a relationship. And, as importantly, I will discuss the implications for cohorts.

Noreen initiated a more in-depth conversation about her experiences with being silenced in her cohort in her follow-up interview than she addressed in the initial interview. She describes herself as being on a spiritual path, a path that she finds very, very challenging. And yet for much of the duration of the program Noreen did not feel that her viewpoint had been valued. In fact, terms such as “Polyanna” and “fluff” had been used to describe her work, suggesting that it was not intellectual enough. As Noreen herself considered those descriptors she declared:

For me it’s not about being a Pollyanna, it’s not about fluff at all. I think it’s just so far from that because it takes so much hard work and commitment and willingness to self-evaluate constantly and it takes a lot of work to stay in the peace. If it were easy we wouldn’t have the conflict that we have within the classroom or within our families. If it was so easy to feel the peace within . . . .It feels like there was such a gap. (Noreen’s follow-up interview, April 10, 2003)

The impact on Noreen was that through much of the program she never felt fully accepted and didn’t feel a sense of belonging. She rarely felt safe to speak about perspectives and values important to her. Noreen also expressed concern about the us/them binary that she saw being perpetuated through some of the cohort discourses. While she thinks it is important to develop a strong sense of pride in being First Nations, “to discover that pride of our nations,” she also thinks “it is important to see that in others too, to see the beauty in other cultures, and to see the world as one. I think that children should be taught to love their families and then that goes out to the community, and to the world internationally.” Noreen suggested that, while not negating the impact of colonization on First Nations peoples in Canada, by creating conditions where we are too separate we risk perpetuating victimhood. We must ensure that the cycle of “woundology” is disrupted. In this cohort there were a lot of
very negative feelings, a lot of anger and feelings of hopelessness, at least from Noreen’s perspective. Despite the tensions created and silencing that can ensue when such views that go against the flow of the class are expressed, Noreen is convinced that those tensions ought to be worked through. That is, it is important to have knowledge of the negative, destructive events of history in order to avoid repeating them, but we must be prepared to focus more on the positives in order to prevent the negativity that keeps many First Nations people in victimhood, keeps many from growing. To set such a tone in a classroom is taxing, challenging, and draining but I argue that it is a necessary task for the very reasons that Noreen states.

In chapter four Margaret described one course in her open cohort context that she felt exemplified a very positive, rich cohort experience with many benefits for participants. She used phrases such as “no need to get into the rhetoric of First Nations history,” “a general acceptance that there was a lot of damage done,” “we still carry the hurt,” “as students we recognized that we must do something about it,” (my emphasis) and “we needed to have those honest, frank discussions.” Noreen used similar descriptors and expressed a desire for goal-setting similar to those articulated in Margaret’s class and recommended by Teitel (1997), and Radencich et al (1998). Noreen felt silenced in her closed cohort context because of her focus on spirituality and her desire to see “the beauty in other cultures, to see the world as one,” while Margaret considered her class to be a highlight of her cohort experience thus far, a benefit of membership in an open cohort. What might explain these polarized outcomes? In the latter instance it is clear that a desirable tone for frank, open, yet respectful discourse was set by the instructor from the outset of the course. And, it seems as though the students were clear that one goal of the class was that we must move forward together, we must be
collectively on a path to effect positive change in First Nations education, rather than expending energy alienating each other.

Sheila, another member of a closed graduate cohort, shared how she felt silenced when sacred rituals that she embraced as a part of her everyday life were dismissed out of hand by very vocal members of the cohort, making her feel like “a huge misfit.” One incident in particular had had an enormous impact on Sheila. In one of the course readings the First Nations author had used the medicine wheel as an organizing tool and to present her argument. In the midst of discussion somebody said, “I think the medicine wheel is overused!” Others concurred and it escalated from there. In recalling this incident Sheila said, “This is a First Nations cohort, we’re all First Nations and I was emotional.” She went on to clarify that,

had it not been a First Nations group she would have spoken out, talked about the values of the medicine wheel, and what that is and how in redefining who we are we have grasped a core of values that are pan-Indian, that we agree on that illustrates for us how we see things, a way to describe in the English language. (Sheila’s initial interview, January 26, 2003)

But Sheila hadn’t done that. Instead, on a more private level, she questioned whether she herself was moving in the right direction or not. She questioned if she understood who she was as a First Nations woman. She had thought the things that were sacred to her were also sacred to our people, “our people being Indian people, First Nations people, and I’m in a First Nations cohort and it’s the First Nations people who were not understanding.” When asked why she hadn’t persisted with articulating her argument Sheila responded that she had thought:

I have a year to go with these people, and do I want to alienate myself from the group? But also I questioned how equipped I was to answer that because it wasn’t . . . I mean I wouldn’t have sources. I mean to me, spirituality and teachings are things that come to us again as a privilege where we’re provided information and teachings, and so
that’s a gift that we carry. You have to carry it in a good way. And so, one of the
teachings that I have is that you only share with people who ask. So, if you don’t want
the teaching then it’s not for me to give it to you. If you don’t ask, and you don’t even
have to know that you don’t want it, it’s not up to me to say, ‘You should read such
and such, or my grandma taught me that . . . ’ it’s so much less than that, and so
sometimes there is strength in silence. And so I left it . . . (Sheila’s interview, January
26, 2003)

And yet, the incident had left Sheila shaken and questioning her fit in the group. After all,
she had just driven 200 kilometers the night before, despite the pressures of all day classes, in
order to get to her weekly sweat lodge. She had been there praying for “each and every one
of the people who are in the cohort,” to pray for “each and every person whose life has
touched hers. And they didn’t believe that it is real?” She felt misunderstood and silenced.
As she said, “silenced by my own teachings.” Had this incident taken place in a mainstream
classroom Sheila would have been more able to share her knowledge and evolving
understandings, “about the generations that the teachings have survived and orally, and that
when you’re redeveloping or reconstructing, that these kinds of criticisms come up.” “Who
are we,” she asks rhetorically, “to criticize when people are doing the best they can with what
they have, and what they’ve been left with?” But, she added, “I didn’t feel like I could say
that to a group of women who are Indian, First Nations people.”

Sheila addressed a number of important issues that contribute to her silencing or that
must be analyzed in the light of her silencing. When Sheila uses the phrases “doing the best
they can” and “[with] what they’ve been left with” she is alluding to the impact of
colonization that has disrupted intergenerational patterns of teaching Indigenous rituals for so
many peoples. These women entered the cohort with a grounding in Indigenous knowledge
and understanding of the implications of colonization for First Nations peoples, in many
cases through first hand experience. Therefore, Sheila was implying that they ought to have
known better than to criticize those scholars who are doing their best to piece together fragments of their histories, in this case through interpretation and use of the medicine wheel as a pedagogical tool. The issue surrounding the medicine wheel also reveals the reticence of First Nations cohort members to challenge the dominant decolonization literature, and may be an aspect of ongoing issues with colonialism and assimilation. Reactions may well have been based on other experiences where Indigenous rituals have been appropriated by non-Indigenous people and students' desires to challenge essentialist notions of Indigenous rituals. In any case, Sheila took exception to how these women, by dismissing the medicine wheel teachings, managed to malign Sheila and others who may have quietly felt misunderstood or silenced.

Mary, who earlier commented, “I don’t live it [being Native] traditionally” revealed her hesitancy to fully lay claim to her First Nations identity although she has roots in a vibrant and politically active First Nations territory. It is possible that she too proceeded with caution in discussing traditions and rituals lest she lay herself open to similar dismissal. Of course, her comment prompted the same question that Doreen asked – “Well, what’s an Aboriginal environment anyway?” Implied in Clifford’s story of the Cree hunter who said, “I’m not sure I can tell the truth . . . I can only tell what I know” (1986, p.8) referred to in chapter one, is that we can only be who we are. Being Aboriginal means different things for different people depending on individual lived experiences. The backgrounds of the research participants reveal their vast range of experiences and origins. When we disparage individual beliefs and practices, dismiss them as invalid or inaccurate, we once again perpetuate the work of the oppressor, we become divisive rather than conjoined in a common effort to move more fully from the margins to the center of the societies in which we live.
At first glance it seems ironic that Sheila felt more silenced on this issue in her First Nations cohort than she might have in a mainstream classroom. But if we examine her words more closely her reaction is logical. She was caught in a double bind, struggling to come to terms with the dichotomous nature of academia and the traditional teachings she refers to and lives by. For her, spirituality and teachings are gifts that “you have to carry in a good way.” And, “one of the teachings that I have is that you only share with people who ask.” In her cohort she was in an academic environment where graduate students are required to thoroughly examine theories, and formulate and argue points of view based on sound reasoning. She was simultaneously a member of an Aboriginal community (her cohort) where teachings were not interrogated, but rather, learned experientially. Sheila was torn about how to respond and in the end deferred to her Aboriginal teachings, choosing not to foist teachings on to others when they were not sought, even if it meant not clarifying what she believed to be misconceptions. She would not have felt as constrained in a mainstream classroom.

Sheila felt that if there had been parameters set up where students came to see themselves as “works in progress” as Keating (2002) does, open to having their minds changed when the cohort was formed, space would have been created for clarification about medicine wheel teachings and the like. At the very least, respectful discourse could have taken place. Then again, she points out, not all of the women were receptive to notions of spirituality and may have interpreted any in-depth discussion of concepts such as the medicine wheel as imposition of the values of others.

Others shared similar experiences where they had felt silenced. Val had mixed feelings about aspects of her closed cohort membership. She prefaced her comment about
the frustration she experienced throughout her time in the cohort with a positive one. However, her criticism provides an example of how cohorts may arbitrarily limit the issues that may be discussed, keeping issues and perspectives that are not deemed relevant or acceptable off the table (Reagon, 1983). Val shared one example:

But there are times when people get on a rant about, whatever. The most popular thing to rant about is Christianity. Once that starts, you can’t stop it. Everybody starts jumping in about their negative experience. And if you are having a positive experience with something you’ve never explored before, you can’t -- like for me, I’ve never explored anything about Christianity . . . .So for me it’s about education too. And there is no space in my cohort to share that, that I can feel. (Val’s interview, February 11, 2003)

Val also stated that cohort members who engaged in the rants felt no need to effectively argue or justify their points of view.

In concluding this section on silencing within cohorts I return to Elizabeth Ellsworth’s (1991) reminder, discussed in chapter two, of how any individual student’s voice is often a contradictory intersection of voices influenced by aspects of our multiple identities (race, gender, able-bodiedness, for example) and the particularities of historical contexts, personal biographies, and subjectivities. Her words take on greater meaning in the light of these students’ experiences, and in some ways help to explain the behaviors of those who were contributing to silencing. I am not suggesting excusing the behaviors, only acknowledging that each expression of student voice is partial. We can’t know their whole story. Rather than assigning blame we would be more productive if we engaged in practices that increase the likelihood of allowing multiple perspectives to be heard. I discuss possible approaches in the next section after considering silencing in cross-cultural contexts.
Silenced In Cross-Cultural Contexts Within the Academy

I speak out of direct and particular anger at an academic conference, and a white woman says, 'Tell me how you feel but don't say it too harshly or I cannot hear you.' But is it my manner that keeps her from hearing, or the threat of a message that her life may change?
-Audre Lorde, 1984

William Tierney (1993) suggests that, in many respects, Native Americans are invisible in the academy. He adds that Native American college students are rarely researched. Institutions do little to devise specific strategies for generating greater attendance and involvement, and ultimately to increase the numbers of Native American graduates. Tierney emphasizes, though, that invisibility is a social construct. Native American students are not invisible to themselves, their families or their communities. Their invisibility, he argues, results from prevalent assimilationist practices and attitudes based on the social integration model. Invisibility, then, is one aspect of being silenced that is intertwined with other aspects, one of many aspects and forms of silencing. Much pain was evident in the words of some of these women as they shared their stories with me. For some, feelings of pain, isolation, and invisibility appeared to be relived as they recalled specific memories. The levels of pain revealed varied, of course, depending on the lived experiences of each prior to entry into post-secondary institutions and during their varying programs, and depending on each person's willingness to discuss painful incidents.

According to Marilyn Frye (1995), one of the most characteristic and ubiquitous features of the world as experienced by oppressed people is the double bind. Options are few and all of them inevitably leave one open to penalty, censure, or deprivation. She provides an example to illuminate her point. Oppressed people, she states, are expected to smile and be cheerful, and if we comply we indicate our docility and acquiescence in situations. By
doing so we are at once signaling that we need not be noticed, that we accept and contribute to our own invisibility, and, in essence we agree to occupy no space.

However, if we choose anything but the brightest countenance we are “perceived as mean, bitter, angry or dangerous” (1995, p. 37), the outcome of which is that we may be described as “difficult” to work with, bitter, or both. Our livelihoods may be jeopardized. Several research participants spoke to such experiences in various university classrooms.

Doreen, while acknowledging that a particular professor was generally very supportive of her, shared how she had given a critique of a novel that she had felt included a lot of stereotyping. Although she had a script she had decided to ad lib her presentation, reasoning that it would be more fluid. To her mind it had worked. At the end of the semester they were to give a brief talk summarizing their course experience. Doreen decided to present a close textual analysis to argue the points she had made in her earlier presentation. As she explained:

My prof at the end said, “Excellent! Much better than the original oral presentation because you weren’t as angry.” And I thought, well, I wasn’t particularly aware that I was particularly angry. In fact I’m quite sure I wasn’t angry. But again that fear of my anger, that fear that I would get out of control. It was weird. (Doreen’s interview, April, 16, 2003)

As Moraga (1995) argues vehemently, if we attempt to deal with oppression purely from the theoretical base, without grappling in an emotional and heartfelt manner with the source of our own oppression, if we fail to name the enemy both within and outside ourselves, there will be no authentic, non-hierarchical connection between oppressed groups, and no authentic alliances can be formed. Was it anger in Doreen’s voice that her professor took exception to, or perhaps it was, as Lorde (1984) suggested at the beginning of this section, the threat embedded in Doreen’s message that his life might change, that kept
him from hearing Doreen? Her professor’s implicit call for a perfectly “nice” response rather than engaging in a critical inquiry into Doreen’s views, appears to have been an attempt to silence her or to render her earlier presentation incoherent (Thompson, 1998). No doubt, such exchanges contributed to Doreen’s commitment to be part of the formation of authentic alliances where multiple worldviews can be heard and considered, especially in departments such as English, which she described earlier as “very, very conservative.”

The insistence that readers critique literary works with neutrality and distance is a theme in most literary criticism classes. Mary mentioned how her professor had provided feedback on a paper directing her to avoid inclusion of personal experience and comments. She recalled:

I remember one time handing in this paper in Canadian Literature. He didn’t like the personal comments. “You shouldn’t be putting in the personal comments . . .” because my paper had to look just so. And I said, “You mean we can’t have a personal opinion in this course? Just you can?” And he wrote back on the note, “Well, if that is the way you see it . . .” or something like that. And that was that. (Mary’s interview, February 28, 2003)

Mary’s experience parallels the voices of participants in a study I conducted (van der Wey, 2002) using Shirley Sterling’s (1992) My Name is Seepeetza, a novel about her residential school experience. The group I worked with was made up exclusively of Indigenous adults, all of whom were or had been graduate students. In literary criticism courses on Aboriginal literatures that they had taken, criteria for the course, or feedback received on assignments, dictated that they leave their personal reactions or stories at the door if they were to be successful. In such classes there was an expectation of a detached, unemotional response to texts, regardless of what memories were dredged up by the experience, regardless of the personal stories they had to tell, and regardless of how pertinent those lived experiences may have been in terms of interrogating the text more meaningfully. Participants had never
engaged in a method used in the context of my study where they were free to develop a relationship with the novel as one means of helping them interpret the relationship between their history, memory, identity, language, geography and culture; the memories and knowledge of the other participants became another form of shared text.\(^9\)

When asked to reflect on the process and pedagogical implications of our shared engagement with this text, participants offered responses similar to those shared by Doreen and Mary, and made several significant observations. They relished the atmosphere of safety developed for sharing the novel with others like themselves who understood and accepted each other’s relationship to the events of history that were addressed in the novel. That atmosphere freed them to react with passion to poignant passages that evoked memories or familial connections without fear of being chastised for being inappropriately angry or emotional, or not being sufficiently objective. In other contexts they hadn’t objected to approaching the novel in a literary way, but they also wanted a space to respond, to not have to “suppress stories” as Karin worded it. As Nora, another participant in this earlier study, pointed out, the history that we learn in university classrooms is also an interpretation, the dominant society’s interpretation. It wasn’t often that she had a chance to critique in this way. All of these examples represent instances of Aboriginal students being silenced because of the exclusionary practices all too familiar in the academy, because of the institutions’ unwillingness to develop new relationships between dominant and other epistemes, as Kuokkanen (2004) argues.

\(^9\) Dennis Sumara (2001) described how he used such literary anthropological research methods, which were developed from his relationship with Anne Michael’s novel *Fugitive Pieces* as one means of helping him interpret his historical relationship to his ancestors.
Dei, Karumanchery, and Karumanchery-Luik (2004) challenge social researchers and theorists who assign claims of neutrality to their work, arguing that by denying the politics, beliefs and experiences that contextualize academic research, such claims are used to maintain the authority and validity assigned to traditional empirical/Western thought and research. Critically conscious researchers (and teachers, I would argue) should reassess the motivation behind their work before asserting claims of neutrality. To claim neutrality, Dei et al argue, is to “negate the importance and over-riding influence of the ‘human factor’ in social research” (p.2). By making such claims social researchers reveal a disregard for subjectivity and the lived experience.

The notion of silencing goes far deeper than not speaking in the university classroom. The roots invariably are found in childhood and early schooling experiences. For some, the long-term implications of living in a society where First Nations voices were often completely stifled have been very costly, at least on an emotional and psychological level. Several research participants found that membership in a First Nations cohort, where they had almost exclusively First Nations instructors, offered to them, for the first time, a sense of fit. Despite that feeling of belonging, the reticence to participate in classroom discourses persisted. Memories of earlier lived experiences, both inside and outside of the classroom, continued to have their impact. As Jill poignantly shared:

I wasn’t the type of person who would go and talk to the instructors. I don’t know. I try to figure that out. I think it has to do with my own personal experiences in life ... I feel emotion about it now and ... protecting myself from whatever that is. ... The authorities that I guess put me down. Not trusting them I guess, not trusting I guess is the main thing. I recognize even today, I’m on my own healing journey, and have been on my own healing journey, and I haven’t gone back to my childhood and addressed those things. And one of those things is not being heard, and not being able to express some of those feelings, not even to my parents. I guess it was just the norm to not be heard, or listened to, or to express yourself. It’s like you knew, you don’t talk about those things. (Jill’s interview, February 8, 2003)
When a non-First Nations member of a closed graduate cohort reacted with anger to Indigenous perspectives of history prevalent in course readings, dismissing their accuracy, Jill recalled another student had stated, “we’ve been silenced for many hundreds of years and it is time for us to learn a more accurate representation of history.” While relieved that someone had taken the woman to task, Jill herself remained silent, her reaction was an internal one. She recalled thinking, “We’re doing the wrong thing again!”

Another form of silencing cited by several participants was not being represented in course syllabi. Jill termed the lack of First Nations content as a form of silencing, not acknowledging First Nations people. In her undergraduate experience, which was not as a member of a cohort, when First Nations topics did come up it was not only the rest of the students but also the instructor who would minimize or dismiss a First Nations view. She added, “And I know that happens and it’s happened to different people that I’ve spoken to. So, for myself I really kind of understand that that will happen so I just keep my voice to myself.”

Martha, who had gone to residential school, spoke poignantly of her first foray into academic life, her first term at university as a young person:

I had just come out of Indian residential school unprepared for life, for anything, especially even making decisions. But I wanted to be a teacher and being at the [name of university] I signed up for a History of Canada course. I went to the course every single day; I never missed. The reason I took that was because at the Indian school I had been denied everything about our culture, our language, and our identities. I desperately needed something to show me that First Nations people were worthwhile, worthy . . . . So I went to this history course every day and not once did I hear the word Indian or Native. So that was my introduction to university. (Martha’s interview, April 14, 2003)

Regardless of whether silencing experienced in academia takes the form of deeming vehement or passionate responses to readings and/or historical events by Indigenous peoples
as “angry,” an unwillingness to develop new relationships among a broad range of epistemes, dismissing the human factor and validity of lived experience in social research evidenced by an insistence on neutrality, or an absence of representation of Indigenous peoples in course syllabi, there is an impact on students, albeit to varying degrees. For some participants such as Jill and Martha, the desire for safety and separation is great and explains, at least in part, employment decisions that provide for such conditions to continue beyond the cohort. For others, regardless of how “successful” they may be academically, they do not experience higher education as a positive, enjoyable experience, nor do they perceive members of the dominant society in a positive light. For example, reflecting on the days when she literally moved between mainstream classes and First Nations courses as she did in her open cohort, Susan was prompted to say:

Those days I really, really hated it. I actually brought that up in the first class. I said, ‘I’m just not feeling well. I come out of this class feeling so good and then from leaving the other class I’m just so drained.’ I didn’t look forward to it at the time. I didn’t like it. I don’t like going to school with all white people. I mean that’s a really harsh statement, but just the mentality. I just think, there’s a sense of culture . . . and a lot of white people say they don’t have culture, but yes you have culture, it is a lot of colonialism culture. There are a lot of power relationships there. (Susan’s interview, April 9, 2003)

William Tierney (1993) quotes a Native American college student who emphasized the misconception of many white students who assume that higher education is a good experience for all. The student acknowledged that education may well provide opportunities for jobs and gaining skills, and that is why he stayed. But he pointed out that a lot of students’ parents see education as a means of drawing students away from who they are.

I contend that higher education must not be an all or nothing venture for First Nations students, where they feel caught between two worlds. Rather, we must create truly inclusive environments within academia where students may maximize their intellectual and leadership
potential without being required to surrender aspects of their identity, or to endure the draining experiences Susan speaks of when in mainstream classes. Students must be free to espouse an Indigenous perspective without fear of being silenced, or of retribution, and Indigenous people must increasingly be seen as central to the educational enterprise, visible in stature and numbers (Tatum, 2004). And yet, we must avoid shaping environments that are insular, environments where members are not open to new ideas and new people.

**Chapter Summary**

Drawbacks to cohort membership were more evident in closed cohorts than in open cohorts. That should not be surprising given that members of closed cohorts take all courses in their program together, whereas in open cohorts there is the element of choice in course selection and some variation in the students who register for each class. Salazar (1997) argues that with increased homogeneity in a group, when members possess similar information, there is greater consensus in decision-making and less impetus for communication. In my research, most particularly in the closed cohorts, not only were members primarily of First Nations ancestry, they were also primarily women. The “homogeneity factor” might explain, at least partially, why some students experienced frustration or a sense of “being stuck” as Teitel (1997) alluded to, with reference to the absence of fresh perspectives in their cohort, and perceived hesitancy on the part of many members to engage in intellectually stimulating discourses. However, if we understand that the motivation for membership in a First Nations cohort is typically a desire for a mutually supportive environment and a place to build networks where all are working towards the common goal of First Nations’ educational success, the “homogeneity factor” alone is an unsatisfactory explanation. Taking into account an emphasis on the affective domain, concerns for long-term relationships must be considered.
in explaining the reticence to challenge each other's perspectives that several closed cohort members spoke about.

While discussing the challenges of taking on a leadership role in her cohort, Liz indicated that she was willing to trade off some of the frustrations of not being surrounded with more members who are hungry for greater intellectual stimulation, as she is, in the interest of being part of a more communal initiative. Sheila, on the other hand, preferred to bide her time until she could apply to a PhD program where she could engage in the intellectual stimulation she missed in her cohort. Yet, membership in a cohort need not mean that the cognitive domain is sacrificed because affective concerns are a priority. The two can be complementary and, in fact, ought to be intertwined. Through articulation of mutually agreed upon goals, facilitation of activities where trust is built and students learn to hear the viewpoints of others in both classroom and social contexts, students may become more attuned to and accepting of the desires, issues, and varying worldviews of others. Further, it must be pointed out that when cohort members, whose beliefs and values have been trod on, choose silence over potential disruption to the well being of the cohort, their affective needs are not being met; social relationships are less fulfilling than they could be. And, as Dyson and Hanley (2002) pointed out, negative social relationships that are developed and sustained over time may contribute to lesser academic gain.

As I suggested in opening this section, writing about the notion of being "Indian enough" is troubling. Yet it is even more disturbing to hear so many stories about incidents where participants felt isolated, invisible, silenced or uncertain about their acceptance in First Nations contexts because others perceived them to be "too white," or implied that they were accepting assimilation by choosing to live in two worlds, or if they didn’t fit others’
perceptions of what it is to be First Nations. Most who experienced such treatment attributed their uncertainty about fit to an absence of pride in being First Nations while growing up, limited first-hand experiences in First Nations communities, and the virtual absence of positive First Nations representation in school curricula.

There are other explanations for such uncertainties about identity, not the least of which is the negative attitudes and stereotypical views of First Nations peoples prevalent in society during participants’ or their ancestors’ youth. Justifiably, these participants ask, “What is an Aboriginal environment anyhow?” By doing so they made clear their awareness of the complicated and fluid nature of notions of identity and their unwillingness to accept that being First Nations means that only one strand of their identity may be highlighted. That is, they are defined by much more than their ethnicity although that strand is integral to how they see themselves. These women announced an unwillingness to be confined by boundaries or measuring sticks of First Nations identity demarcated by others. Despite the struggles of being caught between two worlds, they wished to be a part of raising the visibility of First Nations people and their worldviews within academia, and to contribute to greater First Nations educational success in some way.

Incidences of silencing in First Nations cohort contexts are not necessarily explicitly identity based but identity may implicitly be a factor. For example, if members feel silenced because they embrace “non-traditional” beliefs about spirituality, or hold particular First Nations rituals as sacred where others do not, identity is an aspect of such dismissal. Rather than remaining silent, responses to dismissal must be explicated and an atmosphere created for doing so. All must hear about and recognize the impact of failing to do so, and the implications on group solidarity made explicit. A respectful tone must be set when cohort
members first come together, despite differences of opinion inherent in any group, and space must be created for clarification of varying Aboriginal teachings. As Johnson Reagon (1983) reminds us, in order for places of retreat to be nurturing there must not be gatekeepers whose role is to arbitrarily limit the issues that may be discussed or determine which perspectives are acceptable.

Research participants experienced silencing in varying, sometimes subtle ways. These included, for example, through feelings of invisibility, through feelings of being caught in a no-win situation where they were dismissed whether they were acquiescent or reacted with anger in response to classroom discourses, through an insistence on neutrality where subjectivity and lived experiences are disregarded, and through disregard of Indigenous perspectives of history in course curricula. While frustration was the most typical reaction to being silenced within cohorts, participants expressed stronger emotional responses to being silenced in cross-cultural classrooms, whatever the form.

I argue that open cohorts may be spaces where students’ Indigenous identity may be affirmed while belonging to a larger, shared university community, and where coalition work and bridge building may take place. I develop my argument in support of open cohorts as a site for coalition work further in the next chapter.
CHAPTER SIX:
BRIDGE BUILDING AS AN ASPECT OF COALITION WORK

Bridging is the work of opening the gate to the stranger, within and without. To step across the threshold is to be stripped of the illusion of safety because it moves us into unfamiliar territory and does not grant safe passage. To bridge is to attempt community, and for that we must risk being open to personal, political, and spiritual intimacy, to risk being wounded. (Gloria Anzaldua, 2002, p. 3)

Introduction

Reagon (1983) acknowledges the importance of having safe, nurturing spaces to retreat to as part of building coalitions. First Nations scholar Fyre Jean Graveline concurs, insisting that “coalition-work must be reflected upon as a necessary strategy” (1996, p. 206); that is, we must build networks and alliances with others who have common aims. These scholars and others (for example, Anzaldua, 2002, 1983 and Keating, 2002) emphasize that the work of crossing social borders is taxing, even within groups that consider themselves to all suffer from a form of oppression. Despite commonality of oppression there will still be significant differences within potential coalitions. In this chapter I begin by discussing some of the assumptions, misunderstandings, and lack of knowledge of Aboriginal ways that have rendered cross-cultural communication problematic for Indigenous peoples. From there I discuss the importance of Aboriginal content, pedagogy, and validation in the academy by highlighting four participant voices and perspectives, in particular, voices that emphasize the possible implications of Aboriginal emphasis in mainstream contexts. I then articulate conditions for the formation of coalitions, safer discursive arenas and for bridge building.

Troubling the Notion of Cross-Cultural Communication

The other thing I want to say about cross-cultural dialogue, kind of implies that there is some . . . that cultures have an equal position, that there is this position that we just have to go across these cultures. I think that is not an accurate way of looking at where our cultures are positioned, and that our cultures are positioned in a racial way, that ‘culture’ has come to replace the term ‘race’, that people conceptualize it in the way that race seems to be
conceptualized, and so it’s a myth or a fantasy that there can be cross-cultural dialogue because there is this inference that we have that there is social equality then, that there is social equality between cultures. And that doesn’t exist because our cultures are positioned in a lower place in our society; we’re ‘lower than’ so that there isn’t equality, there can’t be a dialogue across cultures because we’re not positioned in the same way. I don’t know what you’re going to call it though, because if you don’t call it ‘cross-cultural dialogue’, what is it going to be called?

(Liz’s Follow-up interview, April 16, 2003)

I opened this dissertation with the above quotation and repeat it here in order to note that I use the expression “cross-cultural dialogue” or “cross-cultural communication” fully cognizant of the complexities of such a notion, and in order to trouble the notion. As Liz argues, the expression “cross-cultural dialogue” does imply that cultures have an equal position, which they clearly do not. Unless otherwise specified “culture” has come to replace the term “race” and that acknowledgement in itself serves to support the argument that there is not social equality between cultures, that, for example, Indigenous cultures are indeed positioned on a lower rung in our society, at least as Indigenous peoples are perceived by the dominant society. I use the expression conscious also of the assumptions often made that “differences” (including, for example, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, able-bodiedness and the like) are readily observable by outward manifestations, or that our points of commonality are readily apparent. It is also important to avoid making assumptions that individuals in university classrooms and other gathering places necessarily feel safe enough, or confident enough in who they are, to be open about sharing aspects of their identity, readily observable aspects or otherwise.

As William Tierney (1993) argues, it is not enough to put forth theoretical propositions as to why particular groups encounter difficulties upon entering postsecondary institutions. Theories must not only explain what is, but what could be. In reviewing the literature on the challenges of minority groups (in particular Indigenous people) in the academy it is clear that misconceptions abound, assumptions are frequently drawn, and
members of the dominant society perpetuate stereotypes on a regular basis. As Henry Louis Gates Jr. and Cornel West made clear in a discussion with Sam Tatenhaus (2004), it is a misconception that African Americans necessarily view school integration as desirable and accept that separate inherently spells unequal. In fact, what African Americans are seeking when they agree to be bussed out of the inner cities is school excellence. If predominantly black schools could be made excellent, Gates suggests, that would be a satisfactory goal, adding, “I don’t think there is anything magic about being around white people” (Tatenhaus, 2004, p.2). He further comments that without economic integration there will be no residential integration. Without school quality there will be no economic integration. Gates argues, then, that the lack of school quality in urban segregated schools is not because they are “all-black-and-brown schools” but because they are poor and that has prompted the black-middle class to move into the suburbs. They are “poor” in terms of economic resources, but also in terms of intellectual resources.

Gates and West agree that in order for poor black and brown children to be conceived as integral to the public interest middleclass blacks must not abandon them. Rather, middle class blacks must be reminded of the common interests between the black middleclass, upper middle class, and the “black people stuck behind” (Tatenhaus, 2004, p.3); they must be persuaded that it is to the benefit of all blacks if wealth is redistributed. In like manner, Lee Maracle (1989) reminds First Nations people who have achieved class privilege that the majority of our people have not. She adds, “To object to racism or sexism without challenging oneself, whether we are white or coloured, is to deny privilege. All of those with privilege are expected to ‘pass.’ Many of us accept privilege without challenge” (p.175).
Gates emphasizes that the dilemma for black students is dealing with the conflict between excellence and community. The continued popularity of historically black colleges such as Spelman College and Brown University, two highly rated schools, attests to a desire for both excellence and community, as do the burgeoning tribal universities in New Zealand, which now enroll tens of thousands of Maori students. However, such institutions also represent locations where, as Tatum (2004) points out, students from diverse backgrounds may engage in “between group” dialogue, as well as “within group” dialogue. Even in black colleges, she argues, it is not only possible but also essential that opportunities for both kinds of dialogue be created. While faculty of all colors at Ivy League schools encourage students to be multicontextual, West (in Tatenhaus, 2004) sees nothing wrong with Catholics spending time with Catholics, blacks spending time with blacks, but emphasizes that “you don’t want to get locked into that one context” (p. 2). These scholars recognize the importance of community for students of color to spend time with others like them, yet recognize that to be exclusive means that opportunities to dispel misconceptions and assumptions beyond that ‘insider’ community are lost.

In his essay, “The College Experience of Native Americans: A Critical Analysis,” Tierney (1993) interviews Delbert, a Native American college student, to highlight some aspects of Indigenous ways of being that are often misunderstood. They include the lack of awareness of the importance of community, and the failure to understand that “Indian people love staying around and being on the reservation, at home” (p.311). Delbert emphasizes that it is a struggle to come to the university. Instructors, he suggests, need to come to the reservations to see the bonding that takes place. Then, perhaps they would not try to make Native Americans something they are not.
Selena Roberts (2001), in her *New York Times* article entitled “Off-Field Hurdles Stymie Indian Athletes,” discusses how colleges have virtually abandoned recruitment of Native American basketball players. Most recruiters resort to stereotyping when talking about the lack of “success” of Native American athletes. One coach suggested that “they,” meaning Indian students, would rather rely on welfare checks and stay on the reservation than pursue basketball careers, but it is more complex than that. Some potentially top players who do wish to pursue such careers feel sabotaged by their community members, comparing their actions to a “crabs in a bucket” mentality. That is, instead of helping their youths pursue different life paths, some community members zealously attempt to hold them back, even at times resorting to threats of alienation. And there is often jealousy of those who achieve stardom. As one student interviewed by Roberts revealed, “It’s hard when I go home for summer break. They look at you differently. They think, ‘Oh, you’re better than us’” (p. 17) This student addresses an issue that is not uncommon in Indigenous communities, given that scholastic success is still relatively uncommon and unfamiliar. One of my research participants, Doreen, has also had to deal with criticism from her family members. The notion of a family member becoming a PhD is so foreign to them that Doreen’s successes sometimes trigger criticism, rather than compliments. Doreen now attempts to be understanding of what may prompt such responses rather than be angered, whereas she used to be sensitive about it. She explains,

So I always felt that, but I’ve always felt very sensitive to be criticized. And I think you have to just let it go. There are going to be people that will criticize us in any position at any point. Oh well, what can you do? It’s also cultural a little bit too because I can just hear family members saying, “Oh, she thinks she’s so good. She thinks she is so fancy. She thinks she’s so smart. What does she really know?” And you know what? A lot of people in my family or community might say that, but they never had the opportunities that I’ve had, and they’re angry, and they should be. (Doreen’s interview, April 16, 2003)
Roberts (2001) states that it takes courage to leave the reservation, what she terms “the cocoon,” because of the sense of security Indigenous people find within tribal borders where, as she describes it, there is an invisible fence which seals off loneliness, bigotry and condemnation of those who will shun you if you venture too far into the white man's world. Thus leaving home takes on multiple meanings and extends beyond the physical sense of the word.

Other recruiters referred to in Robert’s (2001) article denigrated reservation lifestyles, minimizing the significance of the land, the pickup basketball games that so many Native Americans revel in, and the daily lunches with “dozens of friends and family members” gathered around the dinner table. In such environments Indigenous people feel surrounded by people who understand them, people who will not take advantage of them.

My argument here is that there is no set pattern to explain how or why some Indigenous people choose to remain in their communities or to venture outside. But, as the basketball coach at Montana State observed, unlike the inner-city kid who is frequently heard to say, “I want to get out of here,” you will rarely hear Native American kids say that. What’s important if Native Americans are to be at all understood is that coaches and educators be receptive when Native American basketball recruits make requests to attend tribal ceremonies and the like, and to provide a sense of security for Native American students that extends beyond the basketball court. As Narayan (1988) reminded us, groups with heterogeneous components must take the time to talk about how people may be damaged, intentionally or unintentionally, because non-members of the oppressed group violate the sense of self of the oppressed group. In short, discriminatory practices must cease and American Indians must be freed to “speak their [own] narratives of liberation” (Tierney,
1993, p. 317) and not be required to reflect the mainstream values. For Indigenous people, as Delbert makes clear, success is not necessarily defined by the same standards as those of many members of the dominant society. Other scholars make clear the responsibilities inherent in Indigenous peoples' ways of being as those responsibilities relate to cross-cultural communication.

Indigenous peoples, according to Verney's interpretation of Heidegger discussed in Chapter Two, can choose not to continue to follow a philosophy of the "Other." Rather than getting lost in the everydayness of Eurocentric culture and its philosophical framework, Indigenous peoples are reminded to embrace who we are and not give in to what are for us the inauthentic ways of the dominant society. There is a dearth of information about American-Indian philosophy made available to members of the dominant culture in course syllabi. Sharing our stories and philosophies with members of the dominant society is a starting point if we are to effect change within academia, and in order for them to see us as anything but the stereotypical silenced Indian presence. Further, as Heidegger clarifies, "everything we talk about, everything we have in view, everything towards which we comport ourselves in any way, is being; what we are is being, and so is how we are" (Heidegger, 1962; 26 cited in Verney, 2004:136).

Without using the term "being," Hanna, a research participant, described a First Nations perspective. She said that what is important is "looking at what they value, how they live their lives, and I think the more we learn about other people and their culture, their traditions, what they practice, I think the more open we become as human beings." She added that there was never the phrase "to teach" in Aboriginal languages, rather the expression "to show." And the way to do that, she clarified, is to be a role model. For
example, “elders showing our children how to be respectful, how to value other people. They
didn’t just talk about it, they lived it, and they walked their path.”

Beverly, another research participant, saw herself as having drifted back onto the path
of discovery of who she is as an Aboriginal woman, and is not ready to give way to a
dominant colonial hegemonic ontology. In referring to her strong sense of self that is evident
to others, Beverly stated in words very similar to those of Keating (2002) and Verney (2004)
cited earlier, “It reaffirms to me that people everywhere are searching, that they need the
healing tools that we have to offer. They need the ways in which we view the world. They
need to learn some of the things we know, our ways of being and ways of interacting with the
universe.” She chooses to not be “Other,” and in doing so takes a proactive stance in
embracing her “Nativeness” rather than viewing it as “less than.” She made clear that we, as
Aboriginal people, have much to offer the dominant society through our worldviews,
offerings that must be validated if meaningful cross-cultural communication is to take place.

“It’s an Act of Love” – Aboriginal Content and Pedagogy

When asked about the importance of Aboriginal content and pedagogical approaches
in formal educational contexts, Val spoke of a recent first hand professional development
experience where First Nations graduate students and pre-service teachers facilitated
workshops on Aboriginal epistemologies, content and pedagogy. Val described one
workshop that she had dropped in on as observer and received written feedback on. It stood
out for her both in terms of the enthusiastic response of non-First Nations participants, the
facilitators’ use of curricular integration, and the experiential learning approaches employed.

The pre-service teachers engaged in making cedar roses. The typical quick response
to that task might be, “It’s just for fun,” rather than seeing the multiple levels of learning.
That was not the case here. As Val worded it, "It was so much more than that for the facilitators and the students." Given that this activity was a regular practice in Val's nation she was familiar with the process. "It's going to pick the cedar from parts of Hesquiet on the west coast. It's pounding it. It's keeping it; it's keeping a store from her home territory.”

One of the facilitators had shared every aspect of the process, including traditional First Nations uses of cedar. After engaging in the process of making her rose one of the participants exclaimed, "I wished we could have gone to see the cedar tree, although I know that that's not possible!" For the facilitators the experience was a reconnection to home and the land. And for the student teachers it was a short but powerful way to understand traditional First Nations connectedness to the land, their respect for taking only those resources to meet purposeful needs, and their reverence for all living things.

As Val pointed out, by engaging the teachers in such experiential and engaging learning, the door was opened to discuss First Nations historical and contemporary practices including, for example, giving items like cedar roses away at potlatches and the government legislation that made such rituals and traditions illegal. Within two hours these student teachers engaged in learning that went far beyond the hands-on experience of making cedar roses. I argue that the session likely had an impact on changing attitudes about First Nations people, and those changes, in turn will be reflected in how these students approach First Nations content in their practices, at least for some of them. When Val later interviewed the student teachers they were bursting with such comments as, "Oh, Vygotsky would really approve of this; they did excellent laddering. If I were to do this I would have all the parents in. I would show the parents how to do it first and then we would go and show the students
how to do it!” The two First Nations facilitators were validated directly, and First Nations people were as well, through this introduction to aspects of an Aboriginal epistemology.

Mary used the context of her elementary classroom to provide an example of how she approaches teaching the Aboriginal unit for her grade level. She introduced the unit by starting with a story, and then connected that story to her life, sharing who she is, where she is from, and tidbits about her family. Then, she asked them to reflect on the process they had been involved in. For example, she says to them, “Did you notice how I did that, how I shared things with you? Where did I start first?” That provided the stepping-stone for Mary to follow with:

Well, that’s how we do things at home. We acknowledge who we are, and we start with a story. And you know what? I did something very different though; I think it’s the new generation. I explained with a story map or I let you interpret it, whereas, if I were to do it the way the elders wanted me to do it, I would have just left you with that story and then when there was an opportunity for you to use it, you would explain it in the context that’s meaningful to you, not to me. But because we’re in school, I want you to get the hang of this. (Mary’s interview, February 28, 2003)

Mary did not assume that her students would necessarily understand the process they had been involved in unless she helped them reflect on and analyze each significant part. By explaining her reasons for breaching the normal protocols she helped them understand the two contexts and opened space for them to probe more deeply through further questions. This lesson might be a springboard for later stories where the strategies may be altered, possibly moving to a more “authentic” approach, and ultimately new understandings about the role of storytelling in Aboriginal societies. It’s likely that other students would have stories to tell about their own storytelling practices, whatever their backgrounds.

Inclusion of First Nations curricula for both First Nations and non-First Nations students in university classrooms is critical from Sheila’s point of view. She articulated her
point of view clearly and persuasively in more theoretical terms, and, inadvertently supports my argument in favor of open cohort formats. She stated:

I think that integration needs to happen but the only way that things will change is if we develop a better understanding throughout, with the non-Native community, non-Native academics, and not be seen as special interest. So the same holds true I think with regard to Aboriginal curriculum, sharing our worldview; that if we don't have it widely available then we don't stand much chance of changing the status quo. If it's self-contained, individuals are not out there in an environment where change can be effected. I call it, "preaching to the converted" and we have to move beyond that, we have to break into the mainstream and be accepted on multi-levels ... And isn't that another reason then that as an Aboriginal academic that I be prepared to hold my own and to not feel attacked because someone is questioning a worldview, and First Nations epistemology? (Sheila's interview, January 26, 2003)

By moving beyond "preaching to the converted" and "breaking into the mainstream" Sheila is also advocating for the spanning of "liminal spaces between two worlds," as Anzaldúa (2002, p.1) describes it, where all participants may "acquire new perspectives, change worldviews, and shift from one world to another" (p.1).

University classrooms ought to be spaces, Hanna believes, where students learn more about other people and their culture, their traditions, and what they practice, so that we may become more open as human beings. That is, it is important to include First Nations perspectives, but we must include the perspectives of others as well. During her undergraduate and graduate programs in a school of social work, Hanna had several opportunities to take classes with Indigenous instructors although the classes were open to non-First Nations students. In one class the instructor started each class with a smudge, a First Nations ritual. The other instructor often used pedagogical approaches that Hanna alluded to earlier; that is, he lived the practices he was teaching. He taught respect, for example, by being respectful and he was a role model. She recalled that students didn't get
what he was teaching. In recalling the student responses Hanna wondered aloud how the students might reflect on the experiences now, years later:

It would be interesting to talk to the students now. When they look back and reflect on that course, which was ten years ago and at that time what they were more concerned about was making sure they understood all the theory that we were learning and getting a good grade; that was their focus. It wasn’t about practicing what it was to be a good social worker. Right? (Hanna’s interview, April 19, 2003)

Hanna agreed that when students do not understand the purpose of the pedagogical approaches being used they might leave the class feeling frustrated or angry. The overall impact of the class may be negative with little positive long-term impact on practice. But, she speculated, it was possible that the learning might not be immediate, although concepts or approaches could be recalled when these students were in the field, practicing as social workers. Interestingly, when I next saw Hanna she shared that, coincidentally, she had run into one of her old classmates from that class, a non-First Nations woman, at a conference. While reminiscing the woman said, “Wasn’t that a fabulous class! I learned so much.” Although this was only one voice, it does provide evidence that such pedagogical approaches may have a latent impact, the teachings surfacing when the context and circumstances call the memories forth. The response of her former classmate suggests that, in this case at least, the instructor may have been successful in his efforts to immerse students in a truly participatory and critical pedagogy; successful in his efforts to make possible thinking of knowledge as potentially transformational as Mohanty (1991) believes.

Liz believes that in order for Aboriginal knowledge to be understood in more than a superficial way, critical thinking approaches must be used. She clarified:

Well, you have to come at it with an understanding that there is this perspective and that there is much more behind the perspective than is initially conceptualized, I think, by most people because they haven’t been exposed to that and most education systems don’t honor that kind of knowledge. And so I think the critical thinking approach is
one that has a lot of promise for addressing our knowledge in a respectful and thorough way, whereas in the past, the kind of arts and crafts, or the folksy model - we’re going to look at food, we’re going to look at transportation, we’re going to look at these elements of culture and just kind of slot in different examples from different cultures - that really doesn’t do justice, and it’s all over in an hour, and you can’t really get at the true meaning and the true expression. It’s like they’re being a tourist for this little bit of time. (Liz’s interview, February 26, 2003)

Liz provided a detailed example of how she designed a project for teachers in order to facilitate their addressing our knowledge in an in-depth way. She challenged them to develop what I call “big idea” questions that they would in turn pose with their students. Some of the questions generated included, for example, “What is the most effective form of government for the [name of nation] people? How are Aboriginal people portrayed in the media? Should the potlatch have been banned?” Teachers shaped their lessons around those questions and then developed them further by having [name of nation] people come to class to discuss forms of government, and taking their students to the Big House. Following the project Liz interviewed the teachers. One teacher in particular, who had a significant number of First Nations students in her class, admitted that she had undergone a change in attitude about those students through involvement in this project. “Previously she had thought, ‘Our way is the right way.’ But now she realizes that there is this other perspective that is just as valid as her way of thinking.” This teacher had the courage, as Keating (2002) might say, to begin the process of forging a new alliance or coalition by risking entry into the “unimaginable gulfs of difference” (p. 519) between self and other, thus making the previously invisible edges that divide us visible.

Liz concluded her remarks about Aboriginal pedagogy by referring to an article in the book *Fulfilling the Promise*. In that article various Aboriginal writers revisited the recommendations in the Royal Commission on Education and reflected on where we have
come since then. One author was discussing Aboriginal pedagogy and she had talked to an elder, asking her, “What is it about our way of teaching? How can you express that about teaching?” The elder responded, “It’s an act of love.” After sharing this with me Liz added, “And so I think that there is a role for us as Aboriginal people to understand that caring has to be there for the students.” And caring must be there for all students. I turn now to a discussion of conditions and considerations that must be taken into account in the shaping of safer discursive arenas and alliances.

**Coalition Work and Building Bridges**

I used to cross a trestle bridge near the Boardwalk until a winter storm demolished it. Recently, I watched the workers rebuild this historic landmark, leaving intact some of the original foundation but supporting it with heavy buttresses and integrating it with other new materials . . . . Like the trestle bridge, and other things that have reached their zenith, it [the bridge spanning spaces between liminal worlds] will decline unless we attach it to new growth or append new growth to it.

(Gloria Anzaldua, 2002, p. 2)

Bernice Johnson Reagon (1983) cautions us that members of oppressed groups must be vigilant about not assuming that others cannot understand their oppression because they do not have first hand, subtle knowledge of it. To make that assumption is to encourage their ambivalence. Oppressed peoples must also be prepared to acknowledge that any attempts to bring the margins to the center necessarily implies that there must be movement from the center to the margin; that is, those at the center must be prepared to give something up. Coming to terms with such movement is difficult for those who have traditionally resided at the center.

If those located at the center of society are sincere about joining the struggle for social change they must be willing to hear the stories from the mistreated, even if doing so makes them uncomfortable. By willingly engaging in open conversations about differences with those on the margins non-members may recognize points of connection, or
commonalities without assuming that their own experiences, histories and the like, parallel those of others, without making it about them, as Liz told of experiencing so often in professional development workshops on Aboriginal education. Hanna spoke of the reticence of non-First Nations students in the School of Social Work to learn about Aboriginal experiences:

I think a lot of it has to do with talking about it and I know that a lot of the Aboriginal instructors at university bring in guest speakers just to talk about Aboriginal experience. It’s interesting because I know that a lot of the non-Aboriginal students get really frustrated and they think, “I don’t want to learn this. I just want to be a social worker.” They know they’re going to be working with First Nations people, but they don’t want to take the time to learn about the culture and values. (Hanna’s interview, April 19, 2003)

Giving something up and adding something new can mean recognizing that there must be greater representation of marginalized groups within the academy and in positions of power. It may also mean that faculty members, teachers, or paraprofessionals must engage in what Narayan (1988) terms “methodological humility” or “methodological caution,” which means holding open the possibility that they may have missed something, whether that something is epistemological, pedagogical, or personal in nature. Outsiders must be willing to do their homework. Liz spoke to several of these requirements while referring to a high school context, among them the need for “more of us” in schools. She added:

And I guess there have been different ways that people thought would work, like with the support workers or the paraprofessionals. Maybe that is a bridge to where we need to get to, but those people need to have the training and the understanding in our epistemologies and pedagogy too, because sometimes I have seen situations where I think it is almost damaging to the students in the way that they approach their work. I guess they understand it has to do with how the students feel so they’re giving them a break from the classroom by letting them come to an area of refuge in the school. But at the same time that’s not helping them get through their courses; they’re avoiding the work instead of trying to engage in it, and the support workers are letting the students avoid what they need to get through. (Liz’s interview, February 26, 2003)
When asked for an instance that stood out as a safe discursive arena for cross-cultural dialogue, Sheila immediately spoke of the participants in her weekly sweat lodge, people from a range of ethnic backgrounds, where “there is huge sharing.” She added, “There is listening to each other, that we listen to each other and hear each other and that to me is real cross-cultural dialogue, that we are listening here (motions to the heart) instead of with our ears – the way you listen.”

Engaging in dialogue about race or difference with someone who is not Aboriginal, or from an “ethnic” background, as she termed it, is difficult for Mary, unless that person has displayed interest in the topic and has done much research on it. As Mary said, “You’ll know when they are open because they’ll start the conversation.” She suggested it is hard to be the conversation starter about issues of race or ethnicity because your comments will often garner such responses as, “Are you sure?” “Is that what really happened? Oh, maybe he just meant this.” All are forms of denial, which serve to immediately shut down the conversation. Again, as Reagon (1983) pointed out, being an ally requires a willingness to hear the stories from the mistreated. For Mary there is a shared “sense of knowing” with other people of color, and forming such relationships is imperative because from time to time there is a need to vent, to realize, “Hey, we’re in the same boat! We’re sharing very similar types of experiences here!” “I’m not alone in this!” (Mary’s interview, February 28, 2003). Mary has been able to have those exchanges with her elementary school teaching partner, a young woman of color with whom she has formed a bond.

Sometimes forming such alliances allows for survival, especially when there are few staff members and school community members who are of color. And yet, although Mary discusses how difficult it is to relate to someone about sensitive issues if they are not “of
color,” in the midst of her comments about her teaching partner she also recognized that she had another ally on staff, the principal of the school where Mary is vice-principal.

Mary acknowledged that alliances could be formed even when someone doesn’t understand, either intuitively or from lived experience, but continues to try to hear; it enables you to continue to try to dialogue. While sitting in meetings with a hostile teacher, for example, she finds it reassuring to see that the principal is trying to understand – “I get signals, body language, her comments, how she is willing to accommodate my situation, is trying to help me out, is trying to support me in whatever way she can.” She recalled engaging in a private exchange with the principal and sharing what she would like to say to a particular parent, for example, all the while knowing she could not do so. She found it comforting that the principal said, “Yeah, but it’s okay if you want to say it!” and then added, “You know, how else could we do this?” The principal was willing to sit down with her and try to do some problem solving, despite not really having “a sense of knowing.” In this situation there was an implicit sense of trust. Mary was willing to take the risk of making herself vulnerable in a situation where the principal clearly had more power than she did. Together they moved into that “Third space,” that “no-man’s-land” territory that Keating (2002) refers to, that particular individuals enter for productive dialogical and intercultural encounters, where alliances are formed. The principal signaled her willingness to enter that space through her tone and body language, her willingness to listen to painful stories, and her use of the inclusive term “we,” as in her question, “How else can we do this?”

For some students certain non-First Nations instructors stood out as allies. Spurred on by a non-First Nations mentor’s words of encouragement Beverly took a leap into the unfamiliar and entered the world of theater. That new mentor, who became an ally, proved
to be one of those life-altering individuals who simultaneously encourage and empower, without trying to alter the essence of who you are; rather, they embrace who you are. This faculty member in theater production opened the door to a new world of creative expression for Beverly. She described him as someone who “pretty much takes charge of theater production for all of the shows. He expected you to work hard, but he was very open, very flexible, very friendly. He was casual, but he was formal.” This instructor exuded a trustworthiness that prompted Beverly to entrust her career plans in his hands, and to allow him to guide her. The reciprocal, mutually validating nature of the relationship that evolved is evident in Beverly’s recollection of their last meeting:

The last time that I saw him [he has since died] I brought my drum to him, and he was so in awe of the sacredness of my drum that he didn’t want to touch it and I wanted him to touch it. I wanted him to bless my drum, so this spring when the leaves are full I’m going to go and sing some songs for [this man]. I don’t have a picture of him but I’d like to get one and have a picture of him there when I sing some songs and light some candles. (Beverly’s interview, April 11, 2003)

This mentor and ally enabled Beverly to survive very negative experiences with other faculty members who would cross her path. Beverly was the only Aboriginal person in the program when she was there, and, in her words, she didn’t have “that cohortness”, she didn’t have the support that she had at the university cultural center or the course she took in Aboriginal studies. Individuals such as the mentor/ally that Beverly talked about were genuine and created safe places where she would not be denigrated or discriminated against. She felt that instructors such as this man “respected me deeply and valued me the way that I am, and see my gifts. They are able to see those gifts in me and draw them out. And so they gain a deeper understanding of who I am . . . . And they love me and care about me. And they are deeply reverent about my being, my whole being.” Beverly expressed these thoughts with much passion and conviction; she expressed them with her whole heart. Clearly there
was reciprocity in this relationship, where each learned from the other, and within that “interdependence of mutual non-dominant differences” Beverly found the security that enabled her to “descend into the chaos of knowledge” (Lorde, 2002, p. 107) and return with a vision for herself and the future she is shaping for herself and her people. With this instructor she was not subjected to a critical pedagogue who wished to perpetuate relations of dominance in his classroom (Ellsworth, 1989).

While I was reticent to end this section with a “story” that is not as positive as the others, where hierarchical structures were at least partially dismantled in the interest of meaningful dialogical intercultural encounters, this story does represent the “rationalist assumptions” that Ellsworth argues must be dismantled. If relations of dominance in any classrooms are to be alleviated, relations that are so pervasive, that are the norm rather than the exception, such dismantling must take place and such stories must be illuminated.

Liz, who has worked on multiple curriculum development projects for the Ministry of Education, told of a conversation she had during a coffee break from one such project. This woman, who Liz described as well-educated and a leader in her province in terms of curriculum development, shared that she “just loved going to work at the legislative buildings because for her the legislative buildings really represented security, and it was something solid. It was something that really represented an organization too, because if it wasn’t there, what would it be like?” Liz’s interpretation was that the legislative buildings became a metaphor through which she could express a binary opposition to the efforts being made for inclusion of an Aboriginal perspective in provincial curricula. In other words:

If it is not this orderly, controlled foundation then it is going to be something that is very wild and undesirable. I was noticing that she said that, ‘Oh, I just love working for the government!’ and ‘I just love coming to this building made out of stone!’ And it just represented civilization. She didn’t say ‘civilization’ but that was what I inferred
from what she was talking about. And I thought, 'No wonder it is so hard to do this work with this group of people because that is her mindset.' (Liz’s third interview, April 16, 2003)

As Liz interpreted this woman’s comments in the light of their work together, “it was either her perspective or it was a really uncontrolled, wild, savage, primitive kind of perspective; if it is not this way of looking at the world in social studies and curriculum. But I don’t think any of the other people noticed it.” Liz’s final statement, “But I don’t think any of the other people noticed it,” provides an example of how, as Narayan argues, outsiders are less able to make connections about what they know about oppression between one context and the next. Because they were outsiders they were less able to see that the woman’s comments serve to perpetuate oppression, rather than contribute to its dismantling. Ironically, while Liz has been working to design courses where students are required “to grapple with conflicting yet overlapping worldviews” as Keating (2002, p. 521) recommends, and make connections as one way to avoid creating or perpetuating binaries or crevices between self and other, this curriculum developer was seeking to maintain the divide.

Summary

If the divide between First Nations peoples and the dominant society is to be bridged, attitudes, assumptions, misconceptions and knowledge of Aboriginal ways must be addressed within academia, and educational arenas in general. The notion of cross-cultural dialogue must be troubled. It cannot be assumed that each other’s difference(s) can be recognized by easily observable outward manifestations, and it cannot be assumed that Indigenous people necessarily hold the same beliefs about success or paths to success (in educational settings
and otherwise) typical to Western society. I am not suggesting that Indigenous peoples are not seeking excellence, but excellence must come on their own terms. As Liz emphasized, the importance of community and mutually supportive environments typically takes precedence over individual success, and must be honored within academia. And yet, as Cornel West (1994) points out (albeit while speaking about African Americans), we must not allow ourselves to get locked into one context because such exclusivity means that opportunities to dispel misconceptions and assumptions about minority peoples are lost; spaces for both kinds of dialogue must be opened up while ensuring that we have ample opportunities for sharing our stories and philosophy in mixed contexts with an air of confidence and with expectations of validation. As Heidegger (1962) argued, “being” is about how we behave, what we are and how we are, rather than about what we say. And that is in keeping with an Aboriginal emphasis on experiential learning, learning by observing, analyzing, and doing rather than by being told.

Aboriginal pedagogical approaches and curricula must be widely available within the academy along with the development of critical thinking skills if we are to alter the status quo in a positive way. And we must be open to include the perspectives of others. That implies that the required absorption of one dominant canon must be challenged. By entering into that third space of difference and embracing it, conditions for forging new alliances may be created and bridges built across differences where all may learn from each other. All students must feel that they belong, are cared for, and that their stories, experiences, histories and perspectives are validated.
Chapter Seven:
Cohorts, Coalition Work, and Bridge Building:
Conclusions, and Possibilities for Future Research

Bridge Building is important but some topics should not be spanned.¹⁰
(R. David Edmonds, 2004)

If we don't call it 'cross-cultural dialogue,' what is it going to be called?

I began this research in a quest to explore the cohort experience of First Nations
female graduate students, to hear about their educational experiences, in general, and to
provide a location for them to discuss their experiences in cross-cultural contexts. As I fine-
tuned my research questions it seemed clear that there were two overarching questions
driving the research. Through the process of engaging in open-ended semi-structured
interviews with these women, determining criteria for participation in the research, analyzing
and interpreting the data, and writing the dissertation, several significant changes took place.
Those changes related to my research questions and the major argument of the dissertation. I
discussed the notion of emergent research design in chapter three and argued the importance
of being willing to change research plans in order to meet research intentions. I now extend
that argument to include the ongoing analysis of data in relation to my themes, which
continued to shift and change as I engaged in exchanges of ideas with members of my
committee, revisited data, and immersed myself in relevant literatures. Through this process
I honed my overall dissertation argument. The dissertation took on a life of its own and, I
argue, represents an example of emergent research. I discuss the research questions first, and

¹⁰ My thanks to Jean Barman for passing on this quotation to me after locating it at a Western
History Association conference she attended recently, and as the writing of this dissertation
drew to a close.
then make clear my dissertation argument, including my justification for the changes I have made to both.

As I stated in chapter one, the research questions were:

• What have been the rewards and challenges of participating in cohorts?
• What have been these women’s experiences with voice and silencing in the academy?

In chapters four and five I presented participant perspectives of the rewards and challenges of membership in their respective cohorts and my analysis of those voices in relation to relevant literature. In the process, the thirteen female research participants answered my research questions, in depth. Most of the women perceived cohort membership to have many benefits. Many described their respective cohort as a supportive environment where there was a shared purpose; all were committed to being a part of creating a more positive, hopeful educational experience for First Nations students. Additionally, participants could wrestle with decolonization issues with a shared knowledge in an environment where they were not expected to educate the oppressor, as many of the women had experienced in mainstream classrooms. As well, many women spoke of the shared sense of humor as benefits of membership. For some, being affirmed as First Nations women was a significant, beneficial aspect of their membership in a First Nations cohort; that affirmation of First Nations identity, for some women, was perceived as essential to their survival in academia.

There were also many challenges of cohort membership that were articulated. Some longed to be surrounded by individuals who were as hungry for greater intellectual stimulation as they were, but were willing to trade that off in order to contribute to a more communal initiative. A significant number of women talked about struggles with being
"Indian enough," as a challenge of membership, and they spoke of the frequent incidents where women felt silenced within the cohort. These issues largely went unresolved. For the most part, those incidents took place within closed cohorts. There were also significant incidents of silencing within mainstream contexts, and different forms of silencing articulated in both cohort and mainstream contexts.

My two initial research questions had been answered through the interview process, but as a consequence of data analysis and the writing of the dissertation, a third research question emerged. That is, while I anticipated hearing stories of challenges with cross-cultural dialogue, the analysis of the many incidences of silencing within the cohort led to the third question —

Is intragroup and intergroup coalition building a priority within cohorts?

The importance of this question is central to my dissertation argument, but before I articulate that argument I return to my definitions of cohorts stated in chapter one. They were developed and shaped to be consistent with the respective cohorts the participants belonged to and are in accordance with their views and perceptions of what constitutes cohort membership. The two definitions of cohorts again are:

A closed cohort is a group of graduate students with the shared feature that all members are of First Nations ancestry and/or are working in First Nations educational contexts at some level. In their program of study students take all courses together and complete their "closed" program within the same time frame. Participation in Indigenous gatherings may also constitute an aspect of closed cohort membership.

An open cohort is a group of graduate students who are primarily but not necessarily of First Nations ancestry, and may be from a range of disciplines. Membership may be open to any individual with interests rooted in First Nations progress. Students take one or more courses together, with the balance of their courses taken as members of mainstream classrooms. Participation in Indigenous gatherings may also constitute an aspect of open cohort membership.
Based on my analysis and interpretation of the data it is clear that cohort members and cohort coordinators cannot continue to ignore either intragroup or intergroup differences. Dialogic encounters within and between cultural groups are unavoidable and necessary projects, as Reagon (1983) insists. The issues will not go away. Rising out of this data I argue the importance of bridge-building as an alternative to cross-cultural dialogue. The notion of building bridges across differences is less hierarchical than the notion of cross-cultural dialogue and suggests the possibility of a two-way exchange between worlds. Transformations occur in those threshold spaces, that Anzaldua (2002) describes as “unstable, unpredictable, precarious, always-in-transition spaces” that lack clear boundaries (p.2). In those spaces we may move from a focus on victimhood to a greater level of agency, where we question what we are doing to each other, to others, and to the earth’s environment.

I opened this dissertation with Liz’s quote that ended with the question, “If we don’t call it ‘cross-cultural dialogue,’ what is it going to be called?” because the notion is suggestive of a non-existent social equality between First Nations and other cultures. I submit that the notion of bridge-building allows each of us to honor people’s otherness rather than denigrating them for having different belief systems, skin color, or spiritual practices.

I argue that an open cohort is preferable to closed cohort membership for First Nations students, but that particular principles must be in place. Intragroup and intergroup coalition work must be an important, articulated goal of cohort membership. I am not suggesting that closed cohorts cannot be sites for coalition work. They may be if working across difference is viewed as a priority and is facilitated. However, when students are required to take all aspects of their program together opportunities to dispel misconceptions and assumptions about First Nations people are reduced, opportunities for sharing our stories...
and philosophy in mixed contexts are far less frequent, and the likelihood of creating conditions for forging new alliances and building bridges across differences is diminished. Open cohorts, particularly those where core courses are taken together, offer opportunities to enter into that third space where productive dialogical and intercultural encounters take place and where alliances are formed. Goals for such coalition work must be articulated from the outset and revisited on an on-going basis throughout the duration of respective programs, and strategies for attaining goals must be in place. Open cohorts provide space for both intragroup and intergroup coalition work, a location for the “in and out” movement necessary for both types of coalition work to take place.

Strategies include invoking Narayan’s (1988) notions of methodological humility and methodological caution where space is open for all members to recognize points of connection without assuming parallel experiences or histories. While the perspectives of others are included, they must not dominate classroom discourses; that is, non-Indigenous members must be willing to listen more than they speak. By recognizing that we have much to offer the dominant society, by choosing not to be “other” when we enter the room, and by embracing who we are, we announce that we will not give way to a dominant hegemonic ontology. By daring to step onto the bridge that spans difference between self and other, we take on the challenges of forging new alliances and coalitions without surrendering the essences of who we are, as Edmonds (2004) implies in the quote that opened this chapter. Although coalition work and bridge building were not typically goals in research participants’ cohorts, at least they were not articulated goals, participants’ experiences and perspectives strongly suggest that many believe they ought to be. My third research question, then, is:
Should intragroup and intergroup coalition building be a priority within cohorts?

The voices of participants in this research overwhelmingly support my argument, which is definitively, “Yes, at least it ought to be.”

Clearly there are many benefits to cohort membership for First Nations postsecondary students. But without goals focused on both intragroup and intergroup coalition we risk being insular, of limiting the possibilities of greater First Nations students’ success and of not projecting as strong a voice in society as we might, both individually and collectively. I am committed to being a part of working toward those possibilities for our people.

**Possibilities for Future Research**

In Chapter Three, where I discussed my process of re-prioritizing themes as I wrote and re-wrote early outlines for the dissertation, I indicated the need to discard, for now, several topics that arose in the interviews. Although I found these topics intriguing they were not central to my overall argument; they were potentially tangential or peripheral themes. Including them would have meant placing less emphasis on the central themes of cohort membership and coalition work. I anticipate returning in later publications to those files on participants’ perspectives on Indigenous notions of privilege, and on affirmative action including university entry standards for Indigenous students.

Other prospects for further research stemming from this study abound. Involvement in the formation of cohorts for entry-level First Nations graduate students is one possibility. Such a program of research may involve the researcher consulting with program organizers and students (or prospective students) from the outset and engaging in an action research project to shape the program. The program could explore the perceived needs of the students and how those needs might best be supported. Significant factors that may affect retention
and perceptions of success could also be explicated. Through research such as this we may avoid making assumptions about the commonalities, expectations, desires, and goals of the students. Determining required core courses in terms of number of courses and content is one example of topics requiring discussion, as well as considerations of relevance and the flexibility of the program.

Seeking the perspective of males in both closed and open graduate cohorts represents a variation on this study that is important. Are there significant differences in the ways men perceive their cohort experiences that may alter the way cohorts are designed, even if those men represent a small percentage of the cohort makeup? Are cohorts that are made up predominantly of women stifling or nourishing experiences for men?

Conducting an ethnographic longitudinal study of Aboriginal students’ journeys through their cohort membership in teacher education programs would provide a valuable internal document that may become a springboard for further formal and informal discussions geared toward revamping programs based on students’, instructors’, community, and administrators’ perspectives and experiences. Regular data collection might include participant observation, interviews and surveys throughout and beyond the program. Changes in attitudes, needs, and feelings of success about all aspects of the program could be tracked. Motivation for joining, retention rates and the like might be explained. And the success rates of students in securing a teaching position upon completion of program would provide invaluable, revealing data about overall program structure and delivery. Opportunities designed for students to prepare for, engage in and provide feedback on coalition work or bridge building in mainstream contexts on an ongoing basis could also be monitored.
Another important study might track Aboriginal students who are registered in mainstream teacher education programs, whether as members of closed or open cohorts or otherwise, to determine retention rates and attitudes about the program. Is the formation of strong bonds with peers and instructors a priority and does it affect retention rates? Is open cohort membership, where there is flexibility in course selection and opportunities for cultural bridge building, viewed as preferable? Many aspects of these students' experiences could be explored and analyzed, then compared to Aboriginal students' experiences and success within open or closed cohorts.

Through ongoing research that emphasizes the importance of bridge building across the abyss of difference, we may become increasingly open to and respectful of the differences between us.

Through conversation, through exchanging stories, through exploring our differences without defensiveness or shame, we can learn from each other, share each other's words. And as we do so we'll begin forging commonalities. We must take that risk. (Keating, 2002, p. 529)
REFERENCES


Reid, C. (2002). "We don't count, we're just not there": Using feminist action research to explore the relationship between exclusion, poverty and women's health. Interdisciplinary Studies. Vancouver, University of British Columbia: 309.


You may decline to participate in any interview, or focus group interview. Should you decline to participate in any interview I will ask you to clarify whether you wish to be contacted about later interviews including the focus group interview. You can stop the interview at any time and can refuse to answer any questions you may not wish to answer.

In order to preserve confidentiality and to give you control over the release of information arising out of these interviews, I will return transcripts of your individual interviews to you so that you may have the opportunity to review and edit them. Transcripts of focus group interviews will not be returned to focus group members, but upon request, members may review with me their own portions of the focus group interview. Tape recordings, diskettes on which transcriptions are stored, and printed copies of the transcriptions will be kept in a locked filing cabinet in my office until five years after the completion of the dissertation and publication of any articles or papers about the project.

Please indicate in the space below if you wish to be identified in the thesis and publications after the thesis, or if you prefer use of a pseudonym. You may change this decision at any time. Should you wish to change your decision I will provide you with another Consent Form on which that change may be indicated. Before I publish I will ask you again for your preference.

If you agree to participate in this research project, please sign the attached Consent Form and return to Dolores van der Wey, at the address at the top of this page. If you have any questions, please contact my supervisor, Allison Tom, or me, at the numbers listed above. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Yours truly,

Dolores van der Wey
PhD Candidate
APPENDIX C – INTERVIEW GOALS AND SAMPLE QUESTIONS

INTERVIEW GOALS: INITIAL INTERVIEW

To discover First Nations female graduate students’ interpretations of and experiences with the academy, as undergraduate and graduate students, specifically:

• How their attitudes about cross-cultural dialogue are shaped by experiences within the academy;
• How experiences of being heard or not being heard within the institution may have affected their sense of self as graduate students;
• How curricular resources and pedagogical approaches within the academy may or may not have conflicted with the aboriginal approaches, and consequently may or may not have contributed to feelings of being silenced
• Their descriptions and critique of membership in a First Nations cohort

SAMPLE QUESTIONS: INITIAL INTERVIEW

Can you tell me a little about your undergraduate or graduate school experiences?

Has any experience been particularly challenging or proven to be a roadblock in terms of achieving goals?

Has any experience been particularly fulfilling or gratifying for you?

What do you think of when you say “cohort”? What cohort have you been part of?

How would you describe the group? Did sub-groups or affinity groups form at any time in your cohort? Could you describe the conditions?

Can you tell me a little about what it is like to be a member of this cohort/affinity group and what’s important to you about being a member? The benefits? The drawbacks?

How important is it to you that there is inclusion of First Nations curricula and a focus on aboriginal epistemologies available to First Nations and non-First Nations students in university classrooms?

Do you experience any conflict between the pedagogical approaches and worldviews of aboriginal peoples and those emphasized in the university context? If so, could you provide an example?

Have you had experiences where your voice has not been heard, or where you have felt silenced within the academy? If so, tell me a little about the event and how you reacted?

How important is it to you that your voice(s) be heard within academia?

From your experience, can meaningful dialogue take place within a multi-ethnic classroom? Is it worth the effort? Why or why not?

When have you experienced conditions conducive to effective cross-cultural dialogue? What do you recall about the conditions that made it possible to hear and be heard?

How do you think belonging to a cohort has affected your subsequent experiences in attempting to dialogue effectively with members of the dominant society?

How will you ensure that your growing sense of voice, identity, and confidence will be sustained once you leave the cohort? What will be necessary to sustain you once you’ve left?

How have you ensured that your growing sense of voice, identity, and confidence are
sustained since leaving the cohort?

How can we learn from those experiences to create conditions in a classroom or university setting that may facilitate more positive dialoguing/hearing of each other, where all feel safe to express themselves?

INTERVIEW GOALS: FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS
To explore in greater depth any themes that may have become apparent during analysis of the previous interviews, among all participants;
To provide an opportunity for participants to add insights or clarify responses from the previous interviews.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS: FOLLOW-UP INTERVIEWS
• Looking at your (initial/earlier) interview(s) is there anything that you would like to add?
• Since the last interview has anything significant occurred which has led to new insights or interpretations of questions?
• Looking at your previous interview(s), are there things that you see differently now than you did then?
• Do you have any suggestions for interview questions you think I should have asked?
• Revisit questions from initial interview.

FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEW GOALS
To address in a group setting major themes that have arisen in earlier individual interviews;
To provide an opportunity for participants to address or extend on ideas or themes that others have raised.

SAMPLE QUESTIONS: FOCUS GROUP INTERVIEWS
Present interviewees with a brief summary of major themes raised by earlier interviews. Chart them in the form of questions for reference during interview. Ask interviewees to elaborate on them. Session will end with the following question:

• Are there any other suggestions for interview questions that you think I should have asked or that you wish to elaborate more fully since we last met?
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