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Iain J. Davidson-Hunt & R. Michael O'Flaherty

Natural Research Institute, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada


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PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR ARTICLE
Researchers, Indigenous Peoples, and Place-Based Learning Communities

IAIN J. DAVIDSON-HUNT AND R. MICHAEL O'FLAHERTY

Natural Research Institute, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg, Manitoba, Canada

Relations between external researchers and indigenous communities have been increasingly strained by differences in understanding and in expectation about the relevance of research. In the field of resource management, the potential for conflict over research is increased by the politics surrounding control over the resource management decision making processes. In this article, we propose the creation of dialogic networks that engage researchers and indigenous people as collaborators in a process of knowledge production. Such an applied research process can produce context-specific knowledge networks that support management and planning decisions by indigenous people: these networks we refer to as place-based learning communities. We present a researcher's perspective on this approach through our experience with the Shoal Lake Resource Institute of Iskatewizaagegan No. 39 Independent First Nation located in northwestern Ontario.

Keywords applied research, Canada, First Nations, indigenous peoples, new research approaches, place-based learning communities

Researchers and Indigenous Peoples

Relationships between researchers, situated in research organizations of various sorts, and indigenous communities have become increasingly recognized as problematic (Smith 1999). This stems from two types of exchanges between science-based researchers and indigenous peoples. One type of exchange positions researchers, often referred to as scientists, as the bearers of technological packages (technologies, methodologies and processes) that, if adopted, would substantially improve the welfare of an impoverished indigenous society (Scott 1998). Another considers researchers to be the means by which knowledge is extracted from indigenous societies.
through documentation and then conversion into a form useful for generating profits within commercial markets (Smith 1999). In either case, the knowledge and values of indigenous people tend to be devalued relative to the science-based perspectives of researchers. The experiences of indigenous peoples with scientific and technical research, reflected in these types of exchange, make it difficult for nonindigenous researchers, and perhaps indigenous researchers, to work with indigenous communities using orthodox research approaches (Smith 1999).

In the research domains in which we are active (ethnobotany/community-based resource management/land-use planning) this history has resulted in much soul searching and the recognition of the need for new research approaches (see Davidson-Hunt 2000). Much of the effort has focused on procedural issues regarding ethics, participatory methodologies, and in some cases intellectual property rights (Bannister and Barrett 2004; Posey and Dutfield 1996). There has also been a parallel discussion occurring within the broader knowledge literature that seeks to better understand the similarities and differences between local knowledge, indigenous knowledge, and traditional ecological knowledge (Berkes 1999; Sillitoe, Bicker, and Pottier 2002). While researchers focused on procedural solutions, or debating the fine points differentiating indigenous and local knowledge, some indigenous communities have preempted these discussions by declaring a moratorium on research within their territories (Smith 1999), emphasizing the point that procedural fiddling and a renewed interest in indigenous knowledge did not address the substantive critique regarding distribution of power between researchers and indigenous societies (Agrawal 1995).

The question that has emerged is whether this kind of disengagement is the only available approach to “decolonizing” research relationships (Smith 1999, 3). We cannot answer that question from an indigenous perspective, nor do we purport to present an indigenous perspective here. Such voices have been heard in both the academic literature as well, as evidenced through struggles over research programs dealing with such things as the human genome and ongoing ability to access and make decisions over natural resources (see LaDuke 2002). One way that we can respect such voices is to imagine new research approaches that support indigenous communities in their efforts to take on responsibility for natural resource management for their lands. To do this, we restrict our discussion in this article to research that pertains to the management of natural resources and the environment. We develop our research approach, focusing on what we call place-based learning communities (PbLCs), through an engagement with literature regarding indigenous knowledge and then ground our thinking in a research project undertaken with a First Nation in northwestern Ontario. While our work has been undertaken with Canadian First Nations, it also makes a contribution to the literature that considers knowledge as dynamic, relational networks and the emerging practice of learning communities that bring together researchers and local people (Ingold 2000; Orlove 2002; Raffles 2002). Our goal is to ground this new approach of learning communities in theory and practice while tempering our thinking about this approach by recognizing some of the barriers that will be faced by researchers in following such an approach.

**Knowledge as Process**

Problematicizing the relationship between researchers and indigenous peoples requires researchers to develop alternative research approaches that address the limitations of
conventional methods. The search for new approaches has been central to those working in the field of indigenous knowledge research (see, for example, Agrawal 1995; Berkes 1999; Sillitoe, Bicker, and Pottier 2002). In an applied field such as natural resource and environmental management, the work by Brokensha, Warren, and Werner (1980) recognized the unique value of indigenous knowledge. There is now 25 years of research experience in natural resource management that considers new research approaches with indigenous peoples. This literature has generated an extensive conversation on definitional issues and appropriate ways to signify categories of knowledge variously labeled as local, traditional, indigenous, and traditional ecological. The process of creating classes for a typology of knowledge necessitates the identification of defining features, or boundary definitions, for each class. Much of this work has been done through an examination of oppositional classes such as western versus indigenous, or scientific versus indigenous, with the term “indigenous” potentially being replaced by any of the other aforementioned modifiers (i.e., local, traditional, traditional ecological). While this dichotomy generated a useful debate, as Agrawal noted (1995) there is a need to more clearly specify the diversity of actors and relationships involved in the process by which knowledge is produced.

One of the significant problems of early research on indigenous knowledge was the tendency to see it in the same way that we view artifacts. Indigenous knowledge was traditional and traditional meant something created in the past that had been brought into the present intact, or unchanged, and was often treated as a sacred object (Ingold 2000). Indigenous knowledge was thereby frozen in time, like a pot that has been fired, rather than the clay still being worked by a potter. Objectified in this way, knowledge could be discovered (unearthed), documented, and described through the appropriate methods. In the natural resource management literature, Berkes (1999, 8) provides an early challenge to this approach by stating that traditional ecological knowledge is dynamic and evolves by adaptive processes. Sillitoe (2002, 125) likewise expresses the same sentiments when he asserts that all social systems are dynamic and that methodologies need to account for the dynamic processes by which knowledge is produced. Working from the premise that knowledge is a dynamic process—that knowledge is contingent upon being formed, validated, and adapted to changing circumstances—opens up the possibility for researchers to establish relationships with indigenous peoples as coproducers of locally relevant knowledge: to recognize the role of the researcher in the process of knowledge production through their forming of questions, documentation, and analysis. It is this coproduction that is vital to indigenous community-based natural resource management, given that planners and indigenous peoples rarely have a common understanding of the issues at hand and tend to speak past one another.

From this perspective, knowledge is understood as something that is *brought into use*, not something that is simply there to be described; knowledge therefore depends on context to be understood. At the same time, part of this context is the reality of social hierarchy and unequal power relations, both of which present a real challenge for cooperative research (Latour 1993). Knowledge claims, for instance, are one means by which people assert power over others in making decisions about natural resources (Agrawal 2002); hence, research can reinforce existing inequalities within and between social groups when one social group is able to make its own truth claims that become the basis by which decisions are made (e.g., a given area needs protection because of values identified by regional ecologists).
Similarly, power relations can be reflected in and reinforced through the validation of one form of knowledge by another (Raffles 2002), as when the coincidence of scientific and indigenous knowledge claims is said to verify the accuracy of indigenous knowledge.

In the Canadian context, working directly through a band council makes negotiations over power sharing easier in the sense that there is a defined (limited) authority said to represent Band interests. Nevertheless, in any community there will be numerous layers of power, and successful negotiation with the preeminent public authority does not do away with the responsibility of outside researchers to be sensitive to community divisions—sensitive, but not responsible for resolving them. Thus, the goal of cooperative research is to successfully negotiate and share responsibilities among the various agents of research, not eliminate different communities of interest.

Cognizant of how power relations can affect research, Raffles (2002, 326) suggests we think of the local through the lens of intimacy, as part of an all encompassing field of affective social relations. He suggests that intimacy is “a site for the social production of knowledge and the reworking of human-nature boundaries. It is always within a field of power. It is always in place. It is always embodied. And it is above all else, relational” (Raffles 2002, 326). This suggestion recognizes power relations without seeing power as capable of being transcended by one’s instruments and methods. Formal instruments (e.g., a research protocol) are needed to confront power relations in research, but achieving intimacy also requires researchers and their indigenous colleagues engage in the difficult work of establishing and maintaining trusting relationships that will enable the effective coproduction of knowledge.

There also needs to be recognition of intimacy in how indigenous knowledge claims are given authority. Many indigenous peoples view the source of knowledge as inhering in creation itself, and authority to make knowledge claims is obtained through an ability to understand the laws and principles of creation (Posey 2002, 28). Authority for specific lands is provided by the Creator through an individual’s direct experience and intimacy with a particular place or set of resources (e.g., medicinal plants); in other words, authority to provide knowledge about land and resources emerges from an individual’s personal experience with those places and resources for which the Creator has specifically given the individual personal responsibility (Lane 2002). This perspective has been referred to as “stewardship,” “guardianship,” “custodianship,” or “keepers of the land” (Chapeskie 2002; Lane 2002; Posey 2002). From this perspective, knowledge that is “distanced” from those responsible for the land, such as photo interpretation or surveys based on sampling, cannot form the basis of authoritative and legitimate claims to knowledge in land management decision making.

Much work regarding indigenous knowledge is still focused on the documentation and calibration of knowledge held by local people in relation to a dominant system of knowledge about natural resources and environmental management (see, for example, Huntington et al. 2004). However, one of the goals of collaborative research is not simply to document knowledge but to have researchers and indigenous peoples engage in dialogue about their respective understandings of diverse phenomena. Although the local and indigenous are often portrayed as places anchored in time and sheltered from the currents of history (Wolf 1982), dialogue between place-based peoples, extralocal actors, and globalizing processes has been ongoing (Raffles 2002, 326; Dove 2002). At the same time, insofar as the local emerges out of such interactions with the global, linking different clusters of
knowledge producers, new relationships and ideas have to be “indigenized” or “local-
ized” within the specific identity of a group of people (Sillitoe 2002).

For indigenous peoples the issue is not one of isolation from extralocal peoples
and ideas but whether, as a people, indigenous peoples hold enough power to ensure
such exchanges will support both their identity as a people and their material well-
being (Agrawal 1995; Sillitoe 2002); further, and tied directly to their identity and
material well-being, is the ability of indigenous peoples to fulfill their specific stew-
ardship responsibilities in relation to a particular place. Research on indigenous
knowledge has suggested that inclusion of indigenous knowledge products in
resource management is not a solution; rather, we need to reframe the problem so
that new approaches consider how to create knowledge-producing processes that
include both indigenous people and researchers as agents working on mutually
agreed upon goals.

Place-Based Learning Communities: A Research Approach

Place-based learning communities (PbLCs) are, as we define them, dialogic networks
formed to generate cross-cultural understanding on local problems or events (see
also Barge and Little 2002, 376–377). In other words, the goals of a place-based
learning community are to support people in responding to their own needs, developing
a capacity to generate their own research projects, creating supportive relationships
with other actors through the building of dynamic processes for the coproduction of
locally relevant knowledge.

For the purposes of this article we are thinking specifically of building a com-
mon understanding of resource management issues and coproducing knowledge that
can help to address the resource management priorities of local communities. One of
the key tasks of these dialogic networks is to learn how to work as a group in cross-
cultural contexts to build some form of common understanding—not a common
knowledge set that subsumes two different understandings of the issues, at hand
but an approach that is sensible to and acceptable to the diverse people who form
a place-based learning community. Because place-based learning communities are
rooted in dialog, understanding is necessarily iterative in that a common language
of communication and trust is built up over time and may be subject to constant
revision (Barge and Little 2002).

Our thinking on the research approach we discuss here emerged out of an
extended dialogue with the people of Iskatewizaagegan No. 39 Independent First
Nation (IIFN). IIFN is located on Shoal Lake in northwestern Ontario, Canada,
approximately 200 km east of Winnipeg, Manitoba. Specifically, the learning net-
work emerged out of the experiences of IIFN members Edward (Ed) Mandamin
and Phyllis Jack, who were key actors in the formation of the Shoal Lake Resource
Institute (SLRI). They were working with Davidson-Hunt to organize a conference
on nontimber forest products (see Davidson-Hunt, Duchesne, and Zasada 2001),
and a recommendation of the conference was to undertake more research led by
First Nations to document nontimber forest values and link those values to resource
inventories. After the conference Ed Mandamin and Phyllis Jack approached the
Natural Resources Institute (NRI) to design a research project. It was their expec-
tation that this would allow them to participate more effectively in resource manage-
ment processes like the Shoal Lake Watershed Management Plan (SLWMP). The
SLWMP was a multistakeholder process led by the Province of Ontario to develop
a plan with a primary goal of maintaining water quality for the watershed. The First Nation has to date refused to “sign off” on the plan. The Chief and Council consider that they should only sign government-to-government agreements with Ontario that recognize their authority under the natural law principle of gimiinigowizin gaaganawendang, which in English can be glossed as “keepers of the gifts.” From the perspective of IIFN people, the Creator provided them with everything they need for their survival upon the land; in return, the Creator placed upon IIFN people a duty to take care of the land, the gift on which they survive. In their perspective, this was a key principle for management of the watershed that was not recognized throughout the development of the plan.

IIFN elders invited researchers, as external agents, to work with elders of the community to understand some of their approaches to resource management and through a collaborative process try and communicate such approaches to external audiences. Out of a 3-month dialogue between IIFN and external researchers emerged a set of research goals, objectives, and methods. The results of this dialogue were written up as a discussion paper that described the proposed research in plain English for ease of translation into Anishinaabe. The SLRI submitted the document to the IIFN band council and made an oral presentation so that it might obtain a mandate to carry out the research project with the NRI as a partner. At this meeting, a band council resolution was passed that declared the chief and council’s support for the SLRI to work with the University of Manitoba to develop an indigenous knowledge research program that was in accordance with the First Nation’s commitment to developing technical capacity for the social, economic, and educational well-being of the people of IIFN. This provided the SLRI with a mandate to pursue funding for the research and to undertake the project, subject to review by the elders, who were to be involved in the research. Funding was obtained and shortly thereafter a workshop was held with the elders to deepen the dialogue about the approach by involving those knowledge holders who would make the project possible. Subsequent meetings were held to build a shared understanding of the proposed research. This understanding was written up into a research protocol that specified the terms under which the research would proceed, and this protocol was approved by the band council of IIFN through the passing of a band council resolution. The protocol was also reviewed by the administrators of the University of Manitoba and the two parties signed a research partnership agreement that empowered the protocol.

The process that was utilized in building an expanded Shoal Lake-based learning community is shown in Figure 1. The figure outlines a schematic framework of steps that were taken to begin expanding the learning community and the iterative steps through which dialogue, trust, relationships, shared language and concepts, institutions, technologies, and practices could emerge. This figure provides a sense of the process involved in bringing together people from an indigenous community with researchers from the university community. In this research approach, actors translate, negotiate, and document knowledge regarding specific problems or themes. In so doing, research participants are not merely drawing on the knowledge legacy of IIFN but are also involved in the creation and recreation of that knowledge legacy, building on what has come before and creating anew through engaged practice in solving site-specific problems. What this figure suggests is that all knowledge results are expected to become part of the First Nation knowledge legacy and that this revitalized body of knowledge should inform all subsequent research activities in a positive feedback process. Indigenous peoples, in this approach, are not just sources
of knowledge but active practitioners who coproduce new knowledge that remains rooted in the communities of which they are a part.

The emphasis on dialogue was particularly important in this case because there was no established community-based organization responsible for shaping what research gets done in the community and how that research is done. Although it was very helpful that the First Nation approached the researcher, neither the SLRI nor the chief and council were mandated to oversee community-based research, given their already full responsibilities for socioeconomic development and band administration. The problem we were investigating in Shoal Lake required a focused, community-based research team. The problem-centric and place-specific research approach required that the research team emerge out of the definition of the problem, and hence the actors who become engaged in the research were difficult to predict prior to embarking upon the process. Where community-based research organizations do not exist, there will be no clear guidance on who to include in the research team and what the parameters of the research should be. In the case discussed here, a network was established that linked a place-specific organization

Figure 1. The process of building a place-based learning community using the example of a research project between the SLRI and NRI.
with a centralized organization of knowledge production (the University of Manitoba). While the participants could reasonably ensure that the delegation of authority and power was fairly and openly distributed on the research team, this control did not extend to the boards and panels of the funding organizations.

The lack of a place-specific organization specifically entrusted to guide research and the absence of any effective control of what kind of research could be funded required that research team members spend a lot of time on problem definition and research protocols. When sitting down with elders and other community members to discuss research in the community it soon became clear that not all of the community interests and goals were going to be compatible with or resolvable through the scientific research methods expected by the researcher’s institutional context. For instance, elders had initially hoped the research would help mitigate a declining level of transmission of bush knowledge from elders to youth. While the research recorded bush knowledge, it could not replace the ways in which bush knowledge is taught, nor could documentation replicate the kinds of knowledge that emerge out of the applied learning process. Rather, elder Ella Dawn Green decided that she would undertake a teaching session each fall in which the youth would learn bush skills, and how to learn bush skills, from their elders.

Thus, in light of the very different cultural and institutional expectations being made on the research, a fair amount of time was spent discussing what would be mutually acceptable for both parties to undertake given their very different institutional contexts. Extended dialogue ensured that the community research agenda went through multiple iterations as both sides came to understand what the other side wanted and what was possible within the two communities of interest that were coming together to make the research possible.

The end result of this process of negotiation was a research protocol, referred to earlier, with which all parties were comfortable. The protocol would guide the research process and specify participants’ responsibilities and obligations. Table 1 shows, in summary form, the elements of the research protocol developed with IIFN. This is merely an example of what might be included within a protocol, and can provide a guide to help other researchers think through the process of developing place-based learning communities. The suggestions provided here are not a checklist of steps that resolve the problems between Indigenous Peoples; they merely provide a starting point to ensure that some key themes are included in a dialogue to build PbLCs. PbLCs are rooted in relationship building and this process will change through time and from place to place depending on the people involved. Thus, a research protocol is a site-specific expression of a process of relationship building and communication.

The process of writing a research protocol may seem like yet another burdensome piece of bureaucratic officialdom thrust upon a cast of academics and First Nation administrators already weary of the paperwork required of their positions; indeed, some First Nations may not want to engage in this process at all. Such protocols are based in Western legal conceptions of how authority and responsibility are delegated and as such do not easily accommodate elders’ sense of personal responsibility to a landscape with which they have an intimate history. The importance of the protocol was not in the written document itself as much as the building of intercultural communication and trust, which were prerequisites to the capacity of a cross-cultural research team to address place-specific problems. In the case of Shoal Lake, the First Nation was more comfortable establishing a protocol before working with
Table 1. Elements that can facilitate a dialogue in building a place-based learning community

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<tr>
<th>Element</th>
<th>Brief description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Research mandate</td>
<td>Partners should be able to articulate why entering a research partnership is beneficial; if not, it is not yet time to enter a partnership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project duration</td>
<td>The project duration is typically determined by the funding that can be obtained for the research partnership. However, a community may want to set a time limit on the partnership—a trial period—so that it don’t feel it is obligated to the partnership for an indefinite period.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preamble</td>
<td>A preamble can be used to identify the history out of which the research partnership developed. It provides an opportunity to link the specific research protocol with the larger goals and context of the research partnership.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Project summary</td>
<td>A project summary should clearly specify the purposes and objectives of the research. At the same time it should also indicate the boundaries of the research. In cases where translation is necessary the summary becomes exceedingly important. It is often this document that is translated and the basis by which people will decide whether or not they will participate in the research.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of project partners</td>
<td>People within the community should know who will be involved in the research and who is funding the research. While some of these people may never set foot in the community, anybody who may have influence on the research should be identified.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of research team members</td>
<td>The research team will be those people who actively engage in research within the community. Both community members and other researchers should be identified to the community.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accountability</td>
<td>It is necessary to establish at the outset what roles will be played by different partners. Will community members be researchers, guides, or interviewees? In the day-to-day operations of the research, both researchers and community members should be aware of the chains of accountability overseeing the research. For instance, there may be a committee of the partners (“Advisory Committee”) who meet yearly to resolve problems. However, when something unexpected occurs, to whom is a community researcher or a student university researcher accountable? Or, to whom can they turn for advice and help?</td>
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external researchers. If communication and trust had not been established at the onset, it would not have been possible to undertake the research. One of the parties would have walked away from the negotiating table before the protocol was completed. The protocol was also helpful in dealing fairly and openly with the delegation of authority and power within the research team.

In our research project, the processes of dialogue about the expectations for proposed research, and the eventual development of a research protocol, became the negotiating arena out of which the research results and publications evolved. Trust, respect, and partnerships were negotiated orally among the research team and band council. The signing of the final agreement signified that consensus had been established—it did not establish the consensus itself. The protocol document was not so much a legal or ethical document, but a symbol of the degree of trust that had developed through the negotiation process. In order to develop the protocol, all partners in the proposed research needed to engage in a detailed process of dialogue in order to reach a common understanding of the research project and the use of the

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<td>Methods</td>
<td>Methods need to be discussed at the outset of a research partnership. These may be reasonably adjusted to fit circumstances however the introduction of invasive methods halfway through a project is not acceptable. It will also be necessary to determine how community members can receive adequate explanation of the project, which surpasses simplistic notions of “informed consent.”</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Compensation</td>
<td>It is necessary to be clear how community members participating in the research will, or will not, be remunerated.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Review and dissemination of research results</td>
<td>One of the more important, and difficult, aspects of this approach to research is the review of research, interpretation of the data, and dissemination of findings within a variety of media. There is a need to balance academic freedom while recognizing that data are not free from interpretation when disseminated. It is necessary to discuss and agree upon a process that can allow all parties to be comfortable with how research results will be disseminated. In our case, we review data early through community workshops, we allow the community to review written materials, and we agree to publish dissenting interpretations of our data if we disagree on a particular interpretation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Archiving of research products</td>
<td>It will be necessary to establish how many copies of research products (e.g., tapes, photos, papers and exhibits) will be produced, to whom they will be distributed, and who will maintain an archive.</td>
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results. Formally, the signing of a band council resolution approving of the research protocol signified the band administration’s agreement with the research project. Informally, Elders involved in the project indicated their agreement by attending a pipe ceremony and feast that was held to start the field component of the research.

Once initiated, the knowledge from a variety of participants was translated, negotiated, and documented for a set of research themes. Different actors of the learning community engaged with particular research themes and helped to develop new forms of knowledge as well as new processes that influence other people to become engaged in the reproduction of institutions of knowledge keeping. People learned through a number of different activities, from quantitative plot research and qualitative ethnobotanical research, to workshops and ceremonies. The research contributed to an Iskatewizaagegan knowledge legacy by generating a variety of different knowledge products and processes. An organization such as the Shoal Lake Research Institute (SLRI) was necessary to coordinate the activity and house some of the research products that were generated. As such, the SLRI took on new responsibilities as a holder/creator of an expanding knowledge legacy and social memory. Similarly, as research activities mobilized community members to participate in new forms of knowledge (re)creation, the Iskatewizaagegan knowledge legacy was revitalized and expanded. The research process progressed in an iterative manner in that the themes, learning methods, and outcomes changed as the research team improved the effectiveness of communication and developed new understandings of the research process.

In some measure, the feedback process just described is present in any research process as new knowledge forces a shift in assumptions and a redesign of methodology. What we are arguing here, for a place-based learning community approach, is the need for deliberate and applied dialogue to build a shared understanding of the research process; a well-thought-out research design will not guarantee results when engaging people on their own terms is needed. Further, as we found in the project with Iskatewizaagegan No. 39 Independent First Nation (IIFN), when the First Nation does not have its own experienced research organizations to provide a clear vision for research design, there is a need for detailed dialogue before research can even begin.

Collective solutions require the ability to communicate cross-culturally, to understand each other’s narratives, which in a First Nation context will require participating in arenas of oral communication (e.g., community meetings, ceremonies, workshops, field trips). Community meetings, for instance, were used in IIFN to update elders on the progress of research and to get feedback on how to understand findings and how to proceed with research. However, as vital as community meetings are to this research approach, the way community meetings proceed can at times be quite subtle. Community meetings with Indigenous people are not always conducted with an agenda and action items in the way that, say, a band council meeting would be. Agreement, let alone consensus, cannot always be achieved in a single meeting. Verbal and nonverbal signs of agreement are culturally specific, and in a community meeting with Aboriginal elders, silence does not give consent. A meeting that does not appear to elicit much debate is not necessarily a sign of failure or success. Much of what happens in a community meeting may take place after the meeting, as people discuss the ideas and develop an informal consensus through more personal, face-to-face discussions with each other. For this reason, it is important to maintain constant communication and not depend on single meetings to resolve complex issues.
Challenges for Place-Based Learning Community Approaches

In a large measure, each place-based learning community (PbLC) is unique, and it is up to each researcher to establish a relationship with that community in a manner with which he or she is comfortable. There can be no simple answer, no methodological “fix”—only the work required to build long-term relationships of trust and commitment to community-based initiatives. Even with the achievement of a good working relationship there remain important limitations to a research approach rooted in the suggestions made here.

In a cross-cultural context, different sets of research participants have their own sites of knowledge production and hence their own sets of power relations within which they must negotiate claims to knowledge. Each has its own sets of alliances and loyalties that it must answer to. A university researcher cannot validate an elder’s claims among other elders; nor can an elder have any significant input into the decision-making process through which academic research projects are approved for funding. The goal of a PbLC is to successfully negotiate and share responsibilities across the different levels of the research environment, or among the various agents of research, not to eliminate these different communities of interest. As a further consequence, because PbLCs have an applied focus developed by or through larger community institutions, they do not easily address social divisions within a community; it will be difficult to consider problems of social inequality unless these problems are identified as a concern by community leadership or some other community-wide agency.

More generally, this approach to research clearly requires a much greater commitment of time from the researcher and more money to support this commitment. Unfortunately, the added effort is unlikely to be acknowledged or rewarded by academic institutions that tend to be more concerned about research output rather than matters of process. Research organizations, such as universities, generally limit their involvement in research methods to ethical reviews that are aimed at harm reduction. Ethical reviews are impersonal in their spirit and intent, which is often removed from the reality of face-to-face negotiations that underwrite community-based research. PbLCs require a proactive approach to relationship building based on delivering mutually agreed upon benefits to research parties—rather than saying research cannot do harm, this approach says research must do good. Researchers following the approach proposed here will need to help university administrators of ethical reviews to increase their understanding of these issues.

A major challenge, therefore, will be the establishment of research funding processes that support site-specific, applied research and that allow indigenous peoples a voice in identifying research problems and setting research funding priorities. The best opportunities for collaborative community-based research will emerge where communities have a robust local economy and a clear mandate for research, currently a rarity. One positive model for this would be the formation of PbLCs led by indigenous peoples in partnership with research organizations like universities and other governance partners. Various approaches are being established like the Sustainable Development Institute of the Menominee and other Tribal Colleges in the United States and the Whitefeather Forest Initiative in Canada (Ambler 2002; Chapeskie et al. 2005). Such organizations can then invite outside researchers to participate in mutually beneficial research partnerships. It is increasingly difficult to find people who are willing to simply be providers of information. PbLCs will not help
One of the greatest challenges is overcoming our own cultural assumptions about how authority and responsibility are delegated. As researchers who work within centralizing organizations of knowledge production, we are often accustomed to seeing ourselves as the center of authoritative knowledge production. Any (social science) research that seeks to understand local perceptions of the land will be deeply informed by ideas that are exchanged at the site of research. Using an agricultural analogy, it is tempting to see the site of research as the “field” in which ideas from the center are sown and cultivated by knowledgeable experts, who invite the participation of local residents much like farm owners might hire contract labor in their own fields. New knowledge is formed (or exchanged) in the “field,” and taken back to be validated in the center, whether that is a university, government agency, non-government organization, or some similar institution. PbLCs seek to undermine these conventional relations of power that prevent the free and fair exchange of ideas, and to promote a stronger role in legitimating knowledge production by local agents. To achieve this will require that researchers, who have greater access to decision-making processes made at “the center,” lobby their home institutions to support a stronger role for indigenous communities in research. In large part, this advocacy would need to focus on finding support for applied research that can contribute to community-based initiatives, in addition to the advancement of knowledge more generally.

It is a central role of PbLCs to contribute to local development priorities. If we understand planning to be “the transfer of knowledge to action in the public domain” (Lane 2002, 828), paying attention to the processes through which knowledge is formed only takes us to the first step. Ensuring that knowledge developed through this research approach is “transferred to action” is a different matter. It is not enough to gather indigenous knowledge in a research project and then have that knowledge filtered and transformed to meet externally derived planning goals. IIFN’s participation in the research process was predicated on its understanding the research would contribute to its community-based land use planning process as well as its capacity to engage in a larger regional initiative, the Shoal Lake Watershed Management Plan.

For cooperative research to work, research has to matter: not simply to those who bring new ideas into a community but to the people within that community who help make research happen. The approach we have advocated here is the forming of dialogic networks, place-based learning communities (PbLCs), devoted to applying different knowledge traditions to the resolution of some local concern (specifically here we have been concerned about natural resource management). Rather than merely a methodological tweak, these learning communities are an attempt to engage indigenous (or other local) people in every aspect of research. Outside researchers bring to these networks their own research skills while local participants bring their own knowledge and skills that require new approaches and perspectives to be fully integrated with the more conventional research approaches of the academic researcher.

In the approach we are advocating, it is up to individual researchers to become more personally engaged with communities if they wish to understand people’s sense of personal responsibility for their community and lands. We are proposing that PbLCs can allow for greater engagement between Indigenous Peoples and
researchers, but these networks can only emerge out of site-specific processes of dialogue and negotiation; they are not a list of procedures and protocols to be checked off. This approach to research cannot simply be designed in advance by an outside researcher as though scrupulous attention to methodological detail will provide the opportunity to “get it right this time.” It is but a step toward more fully engaging people as creative agents, coauthors in the research process.

References


