Creating appropriate participatory action research with remote First Nations

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Biography of the Authors

Brian Beaton is a doctoral candidate in the Education faculty at the University of New Brunswick (UNB). He is a researcher with UNB's First Nations Innovation (FNI) research project and a Research Associate of the Keewaytinook Okimakanak (KO) Research Institute. As the former Coordinator of KO's Kuhkenah Network from 1994 to 2013, he worked with a team to develop community-owned telecommunications infrastructures and applications in remote and rural First Nations. He positions himself as a settler researcher working closely with Indigenous peoples. His doctoral research is supported by the KO leadership, their KO organization, a SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship Award, and the SSHRC-funded First Nations Innovation research project based at the University of New Brunswick.

Penny Carpenter is the Director of Keewaytinook Okimakanak's (KO) KNET Services. Working in various capacities from Business and Finance Manager, First Nation Financial Advisor, Telehealth Director at KO since it began as a First Nations council in 1991, Penny worked with the different program managers to develop and successfully operate their programs serving the remote First Nations including the innovative Keewaytinook Internet High School. She has an honours degree in Business Administration from Lakehead University. She is a member of the Lac Seul First Nation and she lives in Sioux Lookout, Ontario with her family. She is the recipient of the PARO Enterprising Women Award 2012 in northwestern Ontario.

This article is a summary of a presentation given on July 4, 2015 at the Atlantic Education Graduate Student Conference at the University of New Brunswick by Brian Beaton. The article is co-authored with Penny Carpenter, Director of Keewaytinook Okimakanak's KNET Network, as required by our research partnership (First Nations Innovation, 2013).

Introduction

Meaningful working relationships with Indigenous communities require researchers to respect First Nation cultural practices and territories. Recognizing and honouring the unceded traditional territories of the Wolastoqey nation as the place for the creation of this article is an essential step for the authors. We thank the Wolastoqey people for sharing their lands and resources that make the production of this material possible and the Cree, Oji-Cree and Ojibway nations that partnered with us and gave us the opportunity to share their story with others.

Our article highlights how using online technologies and participatory action research methodologies appropriately can support collaborative working relationships and research partnerships with remote First Nations and their organizations. This article is a collaborative effort in many ways. The research work was conducted under the directorship of the First Nations Innovation (FNI) research project based at the University of New Brunswick. The FNI project requires all publications be co-authored with an Indigenous person from the region where the research is being undertaken. Working with an Indigenous person ensures the voices of the people and the region are properly represented and appropriately presented. Creating resources of value to the First Nations and their organizations is an important component of all participatory action research.

Our article provides an example of an online research methodology we used successfully in small remote First Nations in northwestern Ontario. We present some of the challenges of conducting online research in remote locations and propose some solutions we used during this work. Respectful and collaborative research in partnership with remote Indigenous communities supports their efforts to survive and thrive in their traditional homelands. In many northern areas in Canada there are no permanent roads and expensive flights on small planes are the only way to reach these remote Indigenous communities. Researchers, based in southern urban universities, have limited time and funds. Using online tools and online methods of conducting research is a requirement in this context.

Across northern Ontario, Indigenous people have lived for millennia in their traditional territories thriving as hunters and gatherers with strong connections to the land and all that it provides to support their existence. This same connection to their traditional territories continues today. Their struggle is ongoing against colonial governments and corporate efforts to access the resources on their lands and remove the people from their traditional territories. Working with their allies, effectively using their digital networks and communication technologies, and conducting collaborative research are tools Indigenous people living in remote First Nations are employing to counter the destruction of their traditional lands and lifestyles. First Nations are

establishing their own organizations and protocols to ensure their digital networks and knowledge are protected and used for their benefit.

Historically, research has a very negative connotation for First Nations because of how often it has been used to exploit them and their resources. In Canada, to gain access to the natural resources in traditional Indigenous territories, governments and their corporate partners apply ongoing economic and social pressures that often leave the remote First Nations with very few resources to sustain themselves. In this context, research has most often supported the colonial approach to caring for and governing these communities. Contemporary research led by the communities and their allies using online technologies has the potential to counter the past myths with narratives celebrating the rich history and innovative aspects of the people and their survival within these challenging environments.

Our article includes a case study of an online research initiative with remote First Nations that considers these challenging contexts. The specific study discussed is a collaborative effort of the ongoing FNI research project at UNB in partnership with Keewaytinook Okimakanak (KO), a First Nations council in northwestern Ontario, thousands of kilometers away. The study used an online questionnaire to engage community members living and surviving in remote, fly-in First Nations.

Participatory research: the online survey with KO

Our methodological approach is holistic, community-centered and participatory. The Chiefs of the KO First Nations established the KO Research Institute (KORI) in 2004 to partner with other research institutions and researchers while ensuring their stories, knowledge, and data are protected and properly represented. Following the principles of OCAP – Ownership, Control, Access, Possession (AFN, 2007; Battiste, 2013; Beaton & Campbell, 2014; Schnarch, 2004), the research, the process, and the data obtained from the study along with the papers and reports produced are owned and controlled by KO and the KO First Nations.

The development and delivery of the survey instrument was a lengthy and close collaboration process between the UNB researchers and the Keewaytinook Okimakanak (KO) First Nations council, KO staff, the KO First Nation community leadership and members. KORI supports the KO First Nations in identifying their research needs and priorities while developing local skills in creating and using local knowledge and information. Research conducted in the KO First Nations is also required to support local and regional developments by creating reports and publications that can be used for accessing, enhancing, and protecting local resources.

Working with KORI, we identified research priorities and designed the most appropriate method to collect data from community members in these remote First Nations given our travel and cost limitations. We decided to use an online survey, as this method was validated previously in 2011 (Beaton, Gibson, Kakekaspan & O'Donnell, 2012a, 2012b). Similar to the 2011 survey, our 2014 survey collected both qualitative data through open user responses and quantitative data through closed multiple-choice questions. The 2014 survey used some of the same questions as the previous successful online survey for comparative purposes and increased the number of open-ended questions to encourage community voices and perspectives.

Starting in the Fall of 2013, information about the online survey was circulated, reviewed, revised, and re-examined by KO program managers, the KO Chiefs and board of directors, and the community researchers. Most of this internal KO communication was led by the director of KORI with FNI researcher support. We worked closely with the KO program managers (education, health, technology, research, administration, etc.) to design questions that would support ongoing KO program development work. Another important design feature of the survey and the questions was that the information being shared in the survey informed participants about the various services and programs available from their First Nation council. The questions were tested and further developed with KO First Nation research assistants to ensure they would support community planning. The survey was lengthy, with 29 questions, many of which had multiple sub-questions, taking from 30 to 40 minutes to complete with some people taking over an hour.

Working with the First Nation organization partners to determine the final questions to be asked is an ethical and respectful process that ensures the information obtained, and the publication deliverables, are owned and useful to the communities. The survey and research protocol met the KO requirements for community engagement as documented by their Research Institute (Keewaytinook Okimakanak Research Institute, 2012). It was reviewed and accepted by the UNB research ethics board. The research respects the guidelines outlined in Chapter 9 of the Tri-council policy statement for ethical conduct and research involving First Nations, Inuit, and Metis peoples of Canada (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences and Engineering Research Council of Canada & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, 2014) along with Indigenous research methodologies (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008).

We launched the online survey at the start of February 2014 and kept it open until the end of March 2014. The survey promotion was targeted specifically at the members of the six KO First Nations. We used SurveyMonkey to deliver the survey. We worked with the Keewaytinook Okimakanak Research Institute (KORI) to engage the community researchers in the six KO First Nations to promote the survey and support community members to complete it. We created a job description and contract to provide a clear definition of roles and expectations for everyone. The research team worked with the community researchers to identify the tools required to promote the survey and to create posters and information bulletins for community members. Appropriate prizes were identified as incentives. The survey was promoted primarily through online means, such as mass emails to KO-KNET email account holders who identified as living in KO communities, messages posted to the KO First Nations e-community and other Facebook pages, and personal Facebook and email messages to encourage community members to complete the survey.

Given that the survey was promoted almost exclusively through online methods, one of the limits of the survey is that community members not using online tools were unlikely to complete the survey without the help of the local research assistant working with us on the study. Community members were also made aware of the survey through offline methods (posters, community researchers, local community TV and radio ads). After completing the online survey, respondents were directed to another page to enter their name, community and contact details for the prize draws. The names were

validated as community members and therefore there is a high level of confidence in the validity of responses.

Throughout the survey period, we prepared regular updates to the community researchers and our KORI partner. When the survey was completed, we worked with KO to prepare reports for the community that were later presented in person and discussed with community members and leadership, and the KO program managers. Follow-up interview and reports using the survey information and meetings with each of the KO First Nations took place during the summer of 2014 when the researchers travelled into each community. Future papers, research, and reports are anticipated outcomes from these community visits. The responses to the survey questions by the KO community members that were summarized in the reports support local community and regional program and service planning and developments addressing local needs and priorities.

Conclusions

First Nations are addressing contemporary challenges in many ways and researchers working with them must use appropriate and respectful research methodologies. One important aspect we as researchers are still grappling with is how to support the resurgence of Indigenous languages in our work with remote First Nations. It will require innovative strategies to support the use and recognition of Indigenous languages in all aspects of the research. The primary researchers on the project cannot communicate in the Indigenous languages. The digital interfaces we use employ the spoken and written English language. It is possible to work with Native language speakers during online interactive video sessions. Careful planning and language resources are required to ensure these communication tools and the methods used by researchers avoid the traditional exploitative and destructive colonial practices of the past. We will continue to explore ways to conduct research with remote Indigenous communities that supports the development of community research capacity and that ideally will provide new local training and employment opportunities.

The principles of OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession) as applied to research and data are essential components for meaningful and respectful relationships with research partners working with First Nations (Assembly of First Nations, 2007; Schnarch, 2004). Researchers working with Indigenous communities are encouraged to recognize and learn about the desires of Indigenous people rather than perpetuate the traditional damaged-centred, colonial approach to presenting their findings and narratives (Tuck, 2009).

Intermediary Indigenous organizations that are owned and directed by First Nations are important partners in working effectively with the people in these remote regions. First Nation research institutes and other support organizations ensure research activities meet local and regional needs and priorities. The collaborative case study with the Keewaytinook Okimakanak Research Institute (KORI) in northwestern Ontario and the University of New Brunswick's FNI research initiative highlights how important it is to build partnerships with academic institutions and academics who respect Indigenous self-determination. It is critical to the success of research partnerships that all partners create strong relationships and maintain trust despite the vast geographical distance between them.

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