

The Interpersonal Skills of Community-Engaged Scholarship: Insights From Collaborators Working at the University of Saskatchewan's Community Engagement Office

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Abstract

Perhaps more clearly than other research approaches, community-based research or engaged scholarship involves both technical skills of research expertise and scientific rigor as well as interpersonal skills of relationship building, effective communication, and moral ways of being. In an academic age concerned with scientific precision, cognitive skills, quantification, and reliable measurements, the interpersonal skills required for research—and particularly community-based research and engaged scholarship—demand growing importance and resources in contemporary discourse and practice. Focused around the University of Saskatchewan's Community Engagement Office located in the inner city of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, the authors draw on over 50 years of collective experience to offer critical reflections on the notion of interpersonal skills in community-engaged scholarship that manifest particularly in place-based contexts of Indigenous community partnerships. Overall, we argue that discourse and practice involving community-engaged scholarship must pay attention to the notion of interpersonal skills in various aspects and across multiple dimensions and disciplines. This approach is crucial to ensure that research is done effectively and ethically, that good quality data are produced from such research, that subtle, systematic forms of micro-aggression and oppression are minimized, and that community voices and knowledge have a meaningful and significant place in scholarship activities.

This paper rests on a single claim—that interpersonal skills are vital for community-engaged scholarship¹. In various social science disciplines, so called soft skills (what we refer to as interpersonal skills) are defined as the social and interpersonal qualities or capacities required to effectively deal with and promote positive human relationships, interactions, personal and interpersonal development, or social participation (Azim, Gale, Lawlor-Wright, Kirkham, Khan, & Alam, 2010; Gibb, 2014; Kechagias, 2011). Strategies of engagement, negotiation, and participatory knowledge production are difficult, but not impossible, to systematize and replicate. These skills often involve communication, emotional intelligence, leadership, organization,

motivation, creativity, and spiritually-informed attitudes, virtues, or values (i.e., compassion, kindness, forgiveness, patience, etc.) (Gibb, 2014; Heckman & Kautz, 2012; Kyllonen, 2013; Thompson & Clark, 2013). As Ridder, Meysman, Oluwagbemi, and Abeel (2014) assert, “The term soft skill refers to one of the many different aspects of social behavior” that can include “communications skills, coaching and leadership abilities, as well as personal qualities such as friendliness, empathy, and optimism” (p. 1).

In contemporary literature, interpersonal skills are often juxtaposed against a host of hard or cognitive skills that center around the cognitive domain and a kind of intelligence attributed to or measured through standardized tests such as the IQ, LSAT, GRE, or MCAT. A notion of cognitive skill can also refer to the processes, procedures, and techniques of scientific endeavor; they are the competencies required that allow researchers to manipulate, employ, and work with the available methods for generating knowledge within a certain field or paradigm of inquiry (Franz, 2009;

¹There are lively debates regarding the differences between community-based versus community-engaged research. Also, scholarship, more broadly defined as those activities involving teaching and learning as well as research, tend to be an afterthought in these discussions. Throughout this paper we use the term community-engaged scholarship to reflect community engaged research, teaching, learning, development, service learning, and artistic works that happen in collaboration with and in the context of specific community partners and settings.

Koen, 2005). To date, higher education admission policies in nearly all developed countries around the world are based primarily on the cognitive skills of standardized admissions tests. Arguments about their validity and fairness abound, yet these discussions focus predominantly on the importance of cognitive ability, its heritability versus learned quality, or race/ethnic differences (Gibb, 2014; Kyllonen, 2013). These sentiments filter into higher education research and training cultures that prioritize and focus almost exclusively on the development of cognitive skills. Outside the academic environment, these trends extend into the workplace. Kyllonen (2013) observes that, due to the literature in industrial-organizational psychology attesting to the importance of how cognitive hard skills are the most likely to identify workers who will succeed at training and work effectiveness, overall selection of candidates is almost exclusively based on cognitive abilities (p. 17). Reflecting these sentiments, many policies and practices in academia are also designed to reward or privilege cognitive or hard skills over and above any notion of social or interpersonal skills.

These tensions between hard and soft or interpersonal and cognitive skills are further reinforced in contexts of academic service-learning and civic engagement. Like aspects of community-engaged scholarship, service-learning is a pedagogical approach that bridges potential theory-practice gaps by actively engaging and connecting students with the wider civic community (and vice versa), in order to accomplish mutually defined goals and objectives (Conville, 2001; Eyler, Giles, & Astin, 1999; Marullo & Edwards, 2000). Although recognition for the importance of university civic responsibility is growing, scholars participating in such practices and discourses still confront polarizing and conflicting expectations of outcomes and measures of success, as an academic culture prioritizing cognitive skills continues to undergird norms and policies that are often at odds with the demands and cultures of community or civic engagement. Moreover, the acquisition of interpersonal skills is often based on engaged experience and processes of embodied doing of social activities in cultural context (Marullo & Edwards, 2000). Again, this embodied sense of experiential knowledge and learning is typically downplayed by academic institutions that emphasize cognitive development. As a result, university training tends to privilege cognitive skills and thereby inadvertently silence, or even impede, the development of embodied, interpersonal skills that are

central for sustained and effective service-learning and engaged scholarship.

These tensions and dichotomies also emerge in contexts of intercultural competence and Indigenous methodologies or knowledge systems (Brown, 2005; Dimitrov, Dawson, Olsen, & Meadows, 2014; Kovach, 2009; Lavallée, 2009; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008). Although practice of service-learning and community engaged scholarship has taken strides to address widening gaps between theory and practice, or the academy and community, these approaches can still carry with them subtle forms of power imbalances that tend to privilege academic or Western forms of knowledge over other cultural ways of knowing and being (Wilson, 2008). Recent calls, therefore, have been voiced to decolonize the areas of collaboration and knowledge production, between Indigenous and Western modes of research and scholarship, between hard and soft skills, and between academic and community-based ways of engagement—and to rewrite and thereby “re-right” the epistemic boundaries among disparate cultural ways of knowing (Dimitrov et al., 2014; Smith, 1999). Thus, an Indigenous and more culturally competent approach to community engaged scholarship can differ from conventional approaches—or qualitative research more generally—in that it embraces and works from an epistemology that “acknowledges the interconnectedness of physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual aspects of individuals with all living things and with the earth...” (Lavallée, 2009, p. 23). Indeed, it is often this spiritual domain and the interpersonal skills engendered therein that are continually and often systematically neglected in contemporary Western forms of knowledge, scholarship, and community engagement (Franz, 2009; Smith, 1999; Wilson, 2008).

Looking more broadly, although cognitive abilities and proficiency with various tools, methods, and procedures of cognitive scholarly endeavors are important, the burgeoning critique in contemporary literature is that social and interpersonal abilities, diverse forms of knowledge and ways of being, and individuals’ personality skills and traits, are equally important for research success and community engagement (Gibb, 2014; Lavallée, 2009). More specifically regarding community-based research and engaged scholarship, it seems that when interpersonal skills are hard to come by, reinforcement of systemic aggressions and abuses can occur. These issues have been especially important to consider in research with Indigenous communities. Historically, academic

research did not always undergo ethical and moral engagements with Indigenous communities, as academic scholarship and research have been plagued with a clandestine history of colonialism, and neo-colonialism (Bennett, 2004; Smith, 1999). This history can inform a top-down view of community engagement with minimal or no impetus for a responsible and reciprocal form of relationship building. Additionally, subtle forms of systemic and systematic racism in academic cultures have further perpetuated a colonialist savior complex, and these forms of “othering” adversely impact Indigenous community/university relationships (Bull, 2010). Recent efforts by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) and the implementation of their “calls to action” will likely go a long way toward assisting the processes of correcting previous harms (Bull, 2010; Smith, 1999; TRC, 2015). The notions that interpersonal skills are somehow more dispensable are also an issue. Thus, throughout this paper we present a critical contribution and re-imagining of the so-called interpersonal skills as being equally central to effective, creative, co-creative community-based research and engaged scholarship—a discussion centered around meaningful engagement and partnerships with Indigenous communities. How do researchers navigate between the cultures that support interpersonal skills required for authentic community engagement and the culture of cognitive skills that saturates academia? How do students and scholars of all backgrounds build competency in interpersonal skills required to carry out their research and collaborative learning endeavors? And how might learning to partner and collaborate with Indigenous communities and peoples shed light on other important areas of community-engaged scholarship?

In offering critical reflections on these questions, the authors here draw on a 50-year collective pool of knowledge and experience pertaining to community-engaged scholarship. All of the authors have worked at some point in their careers at the University of Saskatchewan’s Community Engagement (CE) Office located in the inner city of Saskatoon. As such, the following reflections unfold primarily around the insights that emerge from interactions within these inner-city contexts, and particularly because of the history and politics of the area, in contexts where authentic research with Indigenous communities and cultural ways of being is of particular concern (TRC, 2015).

We first describe the CE Office in detail and our methodological approach to the paper.

Following this, we present three interpersonal skills that have surfaced in our work over the years which we argue are significant for researchers as they carry out community-engaged scholarship of various kinds: (1) Respect and Humility; (2) Diplomacy; and (3) Flexibility. We then address questions pertaining to the development and place-based practice of such skills, including some ways that future scholars and trainees can develop critical competencies in these areas and the ways in which university structures and spaces can support this process. Overall, we argue that discourse and practice involving community-engaged scholarship must continue to pay attention to the notion of interpersonal skills in various aspects and across multiple cultural dimensions and disciplines. This is crucial to ensure that hard cognitively framed research is done effectively and ethically, that good quality data are produced from such research, that subtle systematic forms of micro-aggression and cultural oppression are minimized, and that community voices and knowledge have a meaningful and significant place in scholarship and service-learning activities.

Station 20 West: A Community Engagement Office

The University of Saskatchewan’s Community Engagement (CE) Office at Station 20 West is located in the inner-city of Saskatoon four kilometers away from the main University of Saskatchewan campus. The CE Office focuses on enhancing and building community/university relationships in Saskatoon’s inner city aimed at supporting social, educational, economic, and health equity through research, artistic projects, and community-engaged service-learning. For the most part, projects and partnerships are driven by community interests, recognizing evidence that sustained action and effective knowledge mobilization occur when studies are initiated at the community level (Cook, 2008). The CE Office aspires to be interdisciplinary, link local and global issues, and honor knowledge co-creation and information exchanges that are both meaningful to communities and academically rigorous. To support these ends, CE Office staff endeavor to make it easier for community members, groups, and organizations to connect and collaborate with the university, while also facilitating community connections and offering support, advice, and work or meeting space to scholars and students pursuing community-engaged projects. In many ways, the CE Office functions as an incubator for

community/university collaborations, while learning about and supporting the development of community engagement promising practices among stakeholders.

The CE Office is situated on Treaty Six territory of predominantly the Plains Cree peoples and the homelands of the Métis peoples and within the inner-city neighborhoods of Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, where there is a high proportion of Indigenous peoples in general. As a result, the unfolding place-based reflections are largely grounded within and shaped by Indigenous communities, contexts, and cultural ways of interaction. The primary approach to community engagement and scholarship, therefore, involves what has been referred to as a two-eyed way of seeing, where Indigenous community partners and academics from typically Western ways of knowing (worldviews) are learning to work alongside one another. This two-eyed seeing framework proposed by Mi'kmaw elders Albert and Murdena Marshall was a means to bridge Western science and Indigenous knowledge, an approach that recognizes the benefits of seeing from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing, and to see from the other eye with the strengths of Western ways of knowing, and finally to use both of these eyes together (Martin, 2012). Two-eyed seeing holds that there are diverse understandings of the world and that by acknowledging and respecting a diversity of perspectives (without perpetuating the dominance of one over another) we can build mutual understanding that lends itself to dealing with some of the most pressing issues facing community partners and Indigenous peoples (Iwama, Marshall, Marshall, & Bartlett, 2009). As a loose community of scholars and community members, employing this approach allowed us to foster equivalent consideration of diverse Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews. The projects and insights described here that are situated within the CE Office all employ interpersonal skills particularly suited to navigating multiple contributions from diverse cultural worldviews, perspectives, and knowledge systems.

The CE Office is also situated alongside a host of similarly minded co-locators, including CHEP Good Food Inc., the Boxcar Café, Quint Development Corporation, the Saskatoon Mothers' Centre, and two Saskatoon Health Region programs (KidsFirst and Our Neighborhood Health Centre). Collectively, the co-locators of Station 20 West endeavor to contribute to the social and economic revitalization in Saskatoon, and specifically

Saskatoon's inner-city. It also affords partner organizations and the broader community collaborative project and learning opportunities, and the benefits of shared facilities and equipment, thus enabling each group to make the best use of resources.

Over the last three years there have been approximately 12 community-engaged research projects based out of the CE Office. These range from studies looking at the food environment and interventions within these for families in the inner-city neighborhoods of Saskatoon; studies of the perceptions of those with HIV/AIDS and their access to health care systems; mental health and resilience among First Nations and Métis youth living in Saskatoon's urban contexts; measuring social return and quality management and performance measurement documenting the value added by inner-city social agencies; exploring youth in transit and growing out of foster care; and work with the Saskatoon Mothers' Centre detailing the challenges and barriers for mothers from inner-city Saskatoon contexts. In these and other projects facilitated at the CE Office, several interpersonal skills were identified as being central to the start-up, community-engagement, sustainability, and successful completion of projects.

The impetus of this paper emerged through formal and informal discussions over the course of three years among those working at the engagement office in Saskatoon. We recognized during these discussions that, primarily among the university context and culture, the notion of interpersonal skills tends to be minimal compared to the more cognitive hard skills of research expertise. In practice, however, interpersonal skills were recognized to be central in assisting scholars at the CE Office to not only navigate and negotiate the complexities inherent within community-engaged work, but also to help repair relationships impacted by a legacy of Western knowledge and cognitive skill driven research on Indigenous communities (Smith, 1999). With the intention of developing the knowledge base in this area, and of supporting best practices for community-engaged scholarship, contributing authors offered their critical reflections and experiences regarding interpersonal skills and their use within their various projects and interactions. The first author served as the coordinator of this project over a two-year period, connecting and engaging authors in several conversations and in informal interviews. Together, these conversations and interviews produced

several reflections and insights on interpersonal skills from over 50 years of collective experience.

This was an informal academic project and therefore did not seek ethical review board approval or engage in formal research process. We did, however, follow the principles of thematic qualitative analysis (Rothe, 2000), wherein all contributions on this topic were organized by the first author according to the themes and concepts most referenced. The informal analytic steps included: (1) coding conversations and personal accounts for statements about what people were describing and doing in the contexts of their community-engaged scholarship; (2) developing tentative categories concerning these topics that were explored in further conversations and group meetings; (3) writing memos on the categories; and (4) describing the links between categories and connecting these reflections and categories with the wider body of literature in the area. In the end, three interpersonal skills emerged as being central to community-engaged scholarship at the CE Office: (1) respect and humility; (2) diplomacy; and (3) flexibility. The CE Office provides the backdrop for these discussions and the context within which these skills are practiced and develop. Cutting across and central to all aspects of community-engaged scholarship discussed here is the importance of forming and maintaining positive equitable relationships with Indigenous communities and peoples.

Interpersonal Skills of Community-Engaged Scholarship

Respect and Humility

Respect and humility inform a particular approach to knowledge, including its generation, application, and diffusion. The quality of respect involves an understanding that someone, somewhere, or something is important or serious and as such shapes a way of relating to or interacting with that particular person, thing, place, or situation. Respect also implies that this understanding is worthy of high regard or admiration and demands a certain amount of concern for proper behavior and interaction. Humility is thus coupled with respect insofar as it informs the proper behavioral interaction elicited by respect; the quality or state of not thinking you are better or superior than other people creates an environment where respect can flourish (Wilson, 2008).

For those working at the CE Office in Saskatoon, these qualities, attitudes, and skills assist us in

viewing community members as knowledge experts in their own right, based on their experiences and knowledge working in the area related to the research of interest. This perspective is also the basis of social constructionism and views of cultural relativism (Crotty, 1998), epistemological positions where knowledge emerges through dialogue and exchange among individuals. From this position, there is no single reality or truth, and so reality must be interpreted to discover and comprehend the meaning of events and activities. In this way, it is crucial to respect the expertise and knowledge of community partners and find ways to ensure broader community knowledge and wisdom are fundamentally integrated into a project. By minimizing power imbalances that often situate academic scholars as arbiters of knowledge (Kajner, 2015), respect and humility allow a constructionism position to emerge more authentically thereby recognizing the important sources of knowledge held by members of a community who may or may not have any formal academic training. In this way, axiology informs and substantiates epistemology in important ways.

It is also critical to recognize that academic education in general does not foster this approach to respect or humility. Rather, academic education is primarily focused on creating knowledge experts. In the contexts of community-engaged scholarship, as well as opportunities for service learning, the notion of knowledge experts creates dichotomies between and reinforces power imbalances among community and academic collaborators that can stifle the practice of respect and humility. Indeed, in the contexts of Indigenous community research, we have seen time and time again how important it is for the “experts” trained in Western academic knowledge to be willing to humbly let go of formal titles and achievements in order to respectfully engage with and listen to the views and perspectives of community members and elders who may have limited formal schooling and yet have an abundance of practical, spiritual, or traditional forms of knowledge and experience.

Many of the practical aspects of respect and humility play out in the domain of language and communication. In community-engaged scholarship occurring out of the CE Office, we have learned that communication needs to be focused on a reciprocal process of sharing. It also needs to be kept in mind that community members engaged in research projects do not necessarily have professional backgrounds, so a non-personal approach to

communication often emphasized in academic and professional cultures can be hard for community members and partners to relate to and connect with. To foster deeper collaboration and communication based on respect and humility, we have found that it is ideal for scholars and researchers to open up and share with community members (within reason) about their personal backgrounds and to show vulnerability, as this is often a normal part of the Indigenous cultural norms in many of our community contexts. As one contributor mentioned, “I ask people about their families and tell them about mine. I think this helps us all relate better and build trust.” This humble sharing and exchange of life experiences can create a bridge and common understanding that fosters positive working relationships and mutual respect, which can further minimize potential stereotypes and lower power-distance (Bull, 2010). Building authentic relationships is fostered by respect and humility; it requires a willingness to be personally forthcoming without being self-centered. This form of sharing is central to Indigenous methodologies in particular, as it fosters a practice of research based on living in and being with relationship (Wilson, 2008). Being comfortable with and willing to openly disclose what might be considered personal or private aspects of the self from a Western knowledge perspective are key to fostering powerful relationships that can connect different peoples and cultural ways of knowing in a social and spiritual process that is greater than either of the individuals alone (Wilson, 2008).

In another practical sense, it is also important for community-engaged scholars to learn to use language and speak in terms that respect the comprehension levels of those with whom we work. Being trained to use technically specific jargon or eloquent words that are precise and academically friendly can be alienating to community members who do not have the same vocabulary. We need to be humble in our language use and also listen to the words that community members are using, and not necessarily use these words, but recognize why these words are used, and respect the local dialect and meaning systems that inform their understanding. Indeed, we have found during our activities at the CE Office that community members may not use or have the same meaning for certain words. For example, the word “research” can be threatening or alienating in some community contexts—and particularly many of our Indigenous community contexts where previous emphases on

hard research has damaged community-academic relationships—so learning to be sensitive to these nuances and using alternative words or phrases, like “evidence-based solutions” can in many instances improve communication, cooperation, and engagement (Arrazattee, Lima, & Lundy, 2013).

A further example of language use comes from a local outreach worker who was giving a presentation with a room full of community members discussing HIV/AIDS risks. Despite the honest efforts to offer support and guidance, this individual quickly alienated a large majority of people by using the word “prostitution” in a discussion with core-neighborhood community members about condom use. While he meant no disrespect, this community of people prefers the term “sex work,” which is less pejorative from their perspective than the term “prostitution.” This incident also highlighted that the individual giving the presentation was an outsider and made working with this group of people more difficult than it needed to be. In this way, respect and humility involves a willingness to admit shortcomings and lack of knowledge and being willing to learn from community experts about proper or normal modes of communication within the given community and context. Humility also allows and permits researchers to seek and be receptive to feedback, and incorporate such feedback into their working models of engagement. In this situation described above, the individual apologized for the misuse of terminology and thanked the community members for their feedback and knowledge. The humble posture of learning in this regard, helped to ensure relationships were maintained and “otherness” was minimized (Kajner, 2015).

Reflecting further regarding the qualities of respect and humility as they manifest in language and communication, another author mentioned:

The greatest difficulty I had during my time at the Community Engagement Office was in overcoming my own perspective and training as an academic. In our last project together, I was required to create communication pieces to share with various community members and audiences. It would seem that plain language is the simplest way to communicate, and that anyone familiar with the English language could develop products accessible to all audiences. I believe in everyone’s ability to do so; however, once

years of academic reading and language colonized the very way I thought, it was difficult to take apart this carefully honed approach to communicate simply and directly. I became comfortable with the volume of input from different directions, from both my university and community partners. However, it was difficult to take apart this carefully honed approach to communicate simply and directly.... It was difficult to communicate, in direct and concise prose, alongside distinct visuals, in an efficient way to multiple audiences.

This notion of balancing modes of communication between the demands of academia and community partners was a common theme in all reflections offered by community-engaged scholars at the CE Office. It was further mentioned that what helped people bridge this gap was to work, as much as possible, from a non-power based position, with humility and respect. This approach included aspects of language use and personal sharing as mentioned previously, but also avoiding patronizing language or assumptions regarding what forms of knowledge (community versus academic) are more valuable. Drawing on a constructionist epistemology and a two-eyed seeing approach, researchers have to struggle to view many different forms of knowledge on the same level of power and significance (Crotty, 1998; Iwama et al., 2009). It is having that kind of awareness to co-create safe, respectful, and trustworthy encounters that leads to successful interpersonal interactions. This kind of relationship building is not something that can be codified or systematized beyond description and, as such, it lies within the interpersonal and often subtly embodied skills of the researcher.

Overall, it is recognized that successful community-engaged scholarship is founded upon mutually respectful and trusting relationships among academic and community partners (Brown, 2005; Bull, 2010; Bustamante, Domshy, Findlay, Lovrod, Quinlan, Sayok, & Teucher, 2015; Findlay, Ray, & Basualdo, 2014; Franz, 2009; Kovach, 2009). Phipps, Johnny, and Wedlock (2015), for example, characterize community engaged scholars as “knowledge brokers” who are “responsive to the needs of the community,” and who work “towards a balance between community and academic expertise” in order to “address power differentials

between community and university collaborators” (p. 71). Similarly, Weerts and Sandman (2010) describe community-engaged scholars as boundary spanners who sensitively bridge the different cultural and epistemic worlds of the university and community. Qualities such as respect and humility, and the ability to listen to various needs and ideas are all cited as central characteristics of community-engaged scholarship, especially when working among Indigenous communities and peoples. Practical examples of these skills as provided are intended to add to this literature in this area.

Diplomacy

The concept of diplomacy is defined as the work required to maintain good relations between one or more groups, and specifically the skills required in negotiations and navigations across different cultural divides without causing harm to relationships. Diplomacy is often discussed in political contexts where handling sensitive affairs without arousing hostility is a necessary art and practice. It is especially related to forms of communication where a keen sense of what to do or say to maintain positive relations with others is paramount, or forms of perception where abilities to identify and diffuse potential areas of conflict before they arise or become severe are crucial. In the contexts of community-engaged scholarship employed at the CE Office, diplomacy centers on delicate negotiations between cultural realities and systems of power. For anyone having experience working in community contexts, it is clear there can be significant cultural differences between the norms, customs, and practices of academia and the different local social worlds in community contexts. This situation can manifest with regard to specific terms and language as mentioned previously, or in subtler embodied aspects of dress, behavior, or one's comportment, that is, how one's posture and bodily stance are presented and displayed in a room during a conversation or community presentation.

Anthropologists have long reflected on these aspects of navigating or walking between different cultural worlds (Madden, 2010), and community-engaged scholars from other disciplinary backgrounds are also making important contributions regarding this process of negotiation (Lavallée, 2009; Phipps, Johnny, & Wedlock, 2015; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). One point common in anthropology and community engagement is the need to familiarize oneself with the community as much as possible to foster the engagement process.

It is important, for example, to invest time in learning about potential community partners: What is the culture of the organization, capacity, strengths, struggles; how and what do they communicate; to explore their identity and how they are perceived more broadly. It is important, however, to do this in ways that do not burden the community organization or partner. This could involve subscribing to their newsletters, following them on social media, studying their website and publications, and attending public events they host or participate in. In a sense, then, this background work can prepare scholars working with community to be involved with the culture of the community or organization, and to pick up some of the terminology that is key, the concerns that are frequently mentioned, and the ways of being or interacting that are common or considered normal in those contexts.

It is also important to caution, however, that any time we undertake community-engaged scholarship, we are working implicitly or explicitly with an understanding of what constitutes community. Often, we use “community” synonymously with organization or neighborhood. Other times, we use it to mean a collection of people who, outside of a CE research project, have little connection but because they represent certain constituencies of people, we bring them together for one research project. There are plenty of other ways of conceptualizing community. Related to the notion of diplomacy, however, is the ability to recognize both the community with whom we work and how members of that community see themselves. In this approach, we sympathize with the reflections of Diamantopoulos and Usiskin (2014) regarding the notion of community in their work that was also situated within the inner-city neighborhoods of Saskatoon:

We learned quickly that the “community” researched was not a community at all. It was a field of conflicting interests, values, and social forces, neither cohesive nor coherent. It was a community in dispersal and dislocation as well as a community in development. The theoretical utility of the term “community” might thus limit and even mislead insofar as it suggests a false unity.... To discuss community based research in Saskatoon often meant asking in which community research was “based” and in which communities’ interests that research was conducted. This

created a treacherous terrain for community-based research. (p. 79).

Diplomacy speaks to the learned capacity of negotiating and dealing with these various forms of community and the often-competing demands that can emerge when working with multiple partners, individuals, and stakeholders. It seems again that social constructionism and a two-eyed seeing approach (Crotty, 1998; Iwama et al., 2009) can aid the thinking and practice in this area, that is, that community is something that needs to be learned about and interpreted, not something one can assume exists out there in the world as a fixed entity, and a place where multiple worldviews and ideas are converging, some complimentary and some contending. As Diamantopoulos and Usiskin (2014) again remark, “In contrast to the faux objectivity of documenting ahistorical and de-subjectivized phantom community—populated by facts, figures, and problems alone” a more ethical and appropriate stance “highlights the importance of our interpretive understanding of actors’ identities, aspirations, and strategic conceptions” (p. 81). Community is open and fluid and changes based on shifting intentions and needs of its members. An engaged and culturally mindful sense of diplomacy has been crucial in helping researchers at the CE Office sensitively navigate different cultural worlds and community realities.

Due to the inherent complexities within communities, diplomacy can also help one navigate the terrain of social and moral politics that unfold. This situation involves a reflection on what position and status a researcher holds within a community. Being an outsider who tries to exert influence or who does not pay attention and attend to political dynamics can lead to long-term negative implications. At the very least, it can impact opportunities with different parts of the community, and at most, it can diminish one’s respect and the ability to build and sustain future relationships in a particular community. Community members have the right to take a stance regarding moral and political positions with other community members, while outsiders are not often given as much leeway. Conversely, researchers’ acceptance and access to a community can be based on the ability to get involved and support a community’s position. These types of situations need to be respected, reflected upon, and honestly supported. In this regard, we observe that the strongest relationships between researchers and community partners—

and particularly those involving Indigenous partnerships—tend to emerge where scholars are also activists, allies politically and morally engaged in a community. This alliance ensures that research is inspired by real life community needs and not merely an academic exercise, and that scholars are “walking alongside” the people living and working in the community that demonstrates shared interests and goals.

Related to this is a diplomatic ability to read and interpret the community landscape one is working within. In Saskatoon’s inner-city neighborhoods, this approach entails having both a sound academic understanding of the colonial context within Canada and an ability to interact with community in a way that sets aside a “redeemer” mentality, especially within Indigenous contexts and communities. Understanding the effects of Canadian colonialism from a variety of perspectives helps frame the civic and community responsibilities we each share at the CE Office in dismantling arbitrary power imbalances. These systemic power imbalances have, for so many years, resulted in an inability to facilitate authentic and genuine interactions and dialogue between diverse peoples and nations, and particularly, as Smith (1999) keenly observed, between academic researchers and Indigenous communities. Understanding Canada’s history with a consciousness about the complex journeys Indigenous people are on in the effort to dismantle colonialism is essential to working in and navigating the complexities of community, and it provides a tool for helping to read the variety of landscapes and settings one may enter. Understanding Canada’s dynamic history and contested forms of Indigenous identity is also important to understand the fluid nature of culture in all its diversity.

Colonialism has affected diverse Indigenous communities in a variety of ways and each community may be seeking its own means and methods toward decolonization (TRC, 2015). Seeking support from holders of Indigenous knowledge and cultural protocol is critical for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples new to incorporating Indigenous cultural practices, such as smudging [purifying a room with the smoke of sacred herbs] and praying, into their community-engaged work (Iwama et al., 2009). A resource such as McAdam’s (2009) *Saskatchewan Indian Cultural Centre’s cultural protocols and methodologies book* and traditional knowledge keepers or elders working at the University of Saskatchewan

have helped researchers at the CE Office develop appropriate experience and diplomatic skill in navigating and employing the use of cultural protocols and traditional knowledge in diverse community settings.

A final aspect of diplomacy is about negotiating the actual working relationship between a community partner and an academic researcher. At the outset of a mutually determined project, it is key to discuss and/or develop project terms of reference and when possible to determine the role of all involved with respect to decision making, project resources, post-project responsibilities, navigating conflict, and communicating within the project and about the project. In our experience, these discussions can lead to the formation of formal research agreements between researchers and the community partners. Other times, it is more appropriate that such agreements and understandings are verbal and more fluid in nature. Regardless of the formality involved, it is important to honestly discuss project resources: How they are secured, how they are distributed, accountability, expectations around in-kind contributions, and how they are recognized (Kovach, 2009). In an effort to follow ethical and cultural protocol engagement with Indigenous communities, many researchers at the CE Office are learning to employ the principles of ownership, control, access, and possession (OCAP) in the overall process and how we are committed to community engagement with Indigenous peoples in the urban community contexts of Saskatoon (Baydala, Bourassa, Hampton, McKay-McNabb, & Placsko, 2007; Schnarch, 2004). OCAP principles were established to provide specific direction and a model for how an Indigenous community should be involved in the research process and how research with Indigenous peoples should be conducted. Importantly too, these discussions should also involve talk about values—where they are aligned, where they are not, and their implications for developing a working relationship. Importantly, we have found these principles are useful with all community partners and not just those of Indigenous cultural backgrounds. The more this kind of dialogue occurs at the outset of a collaborative project, the less likely there will be tenuous areas to navigate and negotiate as the project unfolds. Overall, the skills of diplomacy in these areas, coupled with genuine respect and humility, are central.

Flexibility

In addition to being diplomatic at the outset of a project, in harboring respect and humility, and in outlining intentions and forming research agreements, we have learned that it is also important to refrain from approaching a community partner with a “fully cooked” project or proposition. Rather, another important interpersonal skill of effective community engagement is flexibility; that is, the ability to hold onto an initial idea for a collaborative project loosely, realizing that authentic co-creation and collaboration with a community partner, however defined, will fundamentally change the course of a project.

Flexibility is characterized by being ready and able to adapt to new, different, or changing requirements. In community-engaged scholarship as well as service-learning opportunities, it is important to hold reasonable expectations for how efficient or effective a planned or proposed project will proceed. Working with community means accepting different and varying norms with respect to accuracy, efficiency, and timing with regards to tasks, appointments, and communications. To hold community members to normative standards perhaps derived from Western academic systems of knowledge is unfair and disrespectful of where they come from and their cultural or social realities. So too in service learning we have to be clear that the responsibility for civic engagement does not create unnecessary stress on the part of those being “engaged” (Eyler, Giles, & Astin, 1999; Marullo & Edwards, 2000). This approach also comes into effect regarding the results of the research findings themselves. Many working out of the CE Office have been asked to present to community audiences on our research, even when results are still quite preliminary, because it serves a community need for certain information at a particular time. We have made every effort to do this, by analyzing certain results earlier than we otherwise would, and creating presentations or other research products as needed on a flexible schedule. This mode of flexibility and prioritizing community needs and goals reflects Franz’s (2014; 2015) models for disseminating outputs that are important to the community and also beneficial to the university. In these situations, plans for how to create dissemination products through consultation with the communities involved is key, especially when working with Indigenous communities and where OCAP principles are employed.

Flexibility can be a difficult skill to acquire, yet is key to hearing the perspectives and needs of community partners and Indigenous communities and knowledge perspectives. Traditional academic scholarly work tends to reward the individual with responsibilities for archival research with the time for research, writing, and analysis. To a much greater extent, community-engaged work involves teamwork, where multiple partners are responsible for each aspect of work, and the consequences include the health of important relationships, as well as any clients or service-users, and likely students. This also reflects on the notions of cognitive and interpersonal skills more generally, with the former typically focused on individual efforts and merit and the later typically focused on collective knowledge and relationships (Gibb, 2014; Kyllonen, 2013).

At the CE Office, scholars are constantly reminded to hold a project “gently.” In other words, while we might work hard to meet deadlines, and give our best efforts toward knowledge translation, on any given project with multiple partners, endings can occur abruptly, meetings can be canceled, someone might not have time to share feedback, or someone else may have more feedback when we were convinced we had a final product. Ultimately, in our community engagement we have to acknowledge that much of our work is shared, and thus flexibility not only helps to foster better relationships across our community partners, but also allows us to be detached from the specific direction of a project and a “go-with-the-flow” attitude to emerge.

One example of this is illustrated by a project looking into the resilience and well-being of urban Indigenous youth. At the outset of the project the plan was to engage in a photovoice session with 10–15 youth focused around generating knowledge of youth perspectives on or understandings of resilience. After forming a local advisory committee of several parents, youth, community organizations, and elders from the community, as well as the formation of a research team of local Indigenous research assistants, an idea emerged to conduct the project once per season, or four times over the course of a year, rather than only once as was originally planned. This idea, it was suggested, would better capture the natural flux of resilience and well-being that can occur over the course of a year as well as follow important Indigenous teachings and knowledge around the change of seasons ceremonies and cultural protocols. The project coordinator had to be flexible and open to

executing several more rounds of photovoice and qualitative interviews with the youth than were originally planned. In the end, this idea that emerged from interactions and dialogue with community partners and team members produced a better and more rigorous project that more adequately captured urban Indigenous youth resilience and the incorporation of Indigenous forms of knowledge. As such flexibility became important for creating stronger partnerships and collaborations, and for fostering more meaningful research outcomes and projects with potentially higher community impact.

Another perhaps more subtle aspect of flexibility central to engaged scholarship is a comfort at having your day hijacked by community priorities when you are working in an embedded context like the CE Office. This situation can mean putting certain agendas on hold, canceling or rescheduling appointments or meetings due to a funeral or wake. There is also a tendency to drop in rather than schedule meetings and appointments during community-based work, especially with Indigenous community contexts. This flexibility can also mean learning to read and understand indirect communication, recognizing when an approach or idea is not going to work, but still stewarding the relationship to the best of your ability. Overall, then, we have learned to see flexibility as an important asset and skill for those working at the CE Office particularly and other community-engaged places generally, insofar as it allows them to center their efforts on the relationships being engendered through engagement rather than outcomes being driven by university expectations and Western knowledge systems.

Interpersonal Skills and the Pedagogy of Practice

Most literature attests to the notion that interpersonal skills are rooted in aspects of human personality, traits, and preferences yet also involve aspects of learned behavior and social practice. In this regard, Kyllonen (2013) concluded that “traits are not set in stone. They change over the life cycle and can be enhanced by education, parenting, and environment to different degrees at different ages” (p. 462). Overwhelmingly, research in this area suggests that education programs can develop, foster, and increase interpersonal skills directly and the personality factors that inform them more broadly. Given the growing recognition of the importance of soft or interpersonal skills (Bull,

2010; Gibb, 2014; Hackman & Kautz, 2012; Smith, 1999; Tough, 2012), it is clear that higher education and research training will become more concerned with this area of development and competence in the years to come, especially in the contexts of intercultural competence of graduate students (Dimitrov et al., 2014; Eyler, Giles, & Astin, 1999; Franz, 2009).

Our interest here is in exploring, in the contexts of community-engaged scholarship, the degree and manner to which interpersonal skills can be learned or developed. A core theme that emerged from the contributors was the notion of “helping out,” volunteering, or being involved with the community in some way. As previously alluded to, developing credibility in a community takes time, and investment into relationships becomes easier when one is seen as a long-term ally and not as a person who is there in the community for a short time to try to “fix” or “save” a situation. This approach needs to be an important caution in the context of service-learning initiatives that are often crammed into a single semester with limited time constraints (Marullo & Edwards, 2000). Such constraints can inadvertently reinforce the power imbalance and dominance of researchers working within Western knowledge systems that demand access to communities or civic engagement opportunities to fulfill their own responsibilities rather than taking the time to consider mutually beneficial goals and outcomes. One of the authors at the CE Office, for example, works primarily in food security and food systems within inner-city Saskatoon contexts and has done research on cooking with low-income families. In this experience, an important aspect of her work has involved many hours chopping vegetables, doing dishes, and preparing meals. As this researcher reflects, “I think that being willing to contribute to the day-to-day tasks people just need to get done when appropriate is central to the work that we do.” All contributors and community engaged scholars at the CE Office in Saskatoon echo these sentiments.

This dimension of community volunteerism or service learning is not another interpersonal skill per se, but rather a way by which such skills are developed. More than simply a way to build relationships and social connections—although important goals in their own right—what we suggest is that being involved in and volunteering with individuals and organizations in the community is a way of learning, through engaged practice, the interpersonal skills central to community-engaged

scholarship. It is through practice, we argue, and through the embodied engagement in the day-to-day lives of community members and the various cultural communities unique to those that occupy the mainstream academic spaces, that respect and humility are learned and developed, the delicate aspects of diplomacy are grasped, and flexibility becomes felt and known. Indeed, recognizing this notion, Ridder et al. (2014) contend that “many of these skills are hard to acquire by just reading a book. Instead, they can only be learned through *practice*” (p. 1, emphasis added). Similarly, Gibb (2014) concludes:

The most important of the soft skills are best learned with a small amount of highly focused and relevant formal input, a large amount of real-world experience, practice inside and outside of one’s comfort zone, and timely, relevant and constructive feedback from other people in a *community of practice*, and where the consequences of what we do can be easily observed and understood.” (p. 457, emphasis added).

It is these notions of “real-world experience” and practice within a community of support and learning that are central to questions of how students and future community-engaged scholars develop, and indeed come to embody, the interpersonal skills necessary for their work.

The acquisition of any skill requires practice, and the notion of interpersonal or soft skills as discussed here are no exception. What Bourdieu (1977) characterizes as “habitus” is applicable here because we are advocating for interpersonal skill competency that rests on a bodily and social “disposition” that becomes internalized and historicized to the degree that it operates within a given “field” as a kind of bodily know-how or second nature—an “unconscious, collectively inculcated principle for the generation and structuring of practices and representations” (p. 72). Habitus, for Bourdieu (1977; 1990), is shaped within a field, a structured social or cultural space with its own rules, norms, and schemes for behavior. In this regard, we suggest these interpersonal skills are largely a somatic form of practice and reflection that are part of a broader vision of somatic knowledge—an embodied, preconceptual, and nonpropositional type of knowledge.

In the context of community-engaged scholarship, participation and volunteerism within a community fosters the development of a localized habitus that allows one to operate with cultural appropriateness and proficiency. In this way, our use of the concept of community throughout largely reflects Bourdieu’s (1990) notion of field, the interactive social and cultural space where embodied practices are learned and developed. What we are suggesting here is that the development of competency in the areas of community-engaged scholarship must include the embodied practice of interpersonal skills such as humility, respect, diplomacy, and flexibility among others. Building on what Gibb (2014) suggests, the development of interpersonal skills, then, are based on a large amount of “real-world experience” and engagement in practice, a meaningful form of involvement within the community and a helping with the day-to-day events and needs of people, while also receiving feedback from a “community of practice,” individuals who have engaged with the specific community before or who have already developed a sense of proficiency regarding interpersonal skills and their performance (p. 457).

Bourdieu (1990; 1997), in his attempt to dismantle subject-object dualisms that abound in social science literature, proposed an important two-way relationship between the notions of habitus and field. The field, or in our sense community, exists only insofar as social agents possess the dispositions and set of perceptual schemata that are necessary to constitute that field and imbue it with meaning (Bourdieu, 1997). At the same time, by participating in the field, agents incorporate into their habitus the proper embodied know-how and ways of being that will allow them to constitute the field. Habitus thus manifests the structures of the field, and the field mediates between habitus and practice (Bourdieu, 1990).

In our context, this is to say that as community-engaged scholars learn and embody modes of being within a given community, including the practice of interpersonal skills, they become a part of that community and in turn co-transformers and collaborators in the process. This notion of practice in community-based scholarship and service learning, then, as central for the development of community relationships, habitus, and interpersonal skills, is entirely opposed to the notion of objective or overtly cognitive social research where a community is conceptualized as some form of “other” (Kajner, 2015). As such, we argue that

interpersonal skills are core to effective, creative, co-creative community-based research and engaged scholarship, and their development is necessary in contexts where hard cognitive research has been associated with harmful aspects of de-contextualization and de-personalization for political, ethical, and/or economic purposes. In our contexts at the CE Office within Saskatoon's inner-city, these concepts manifest in relation to Indigenous and Western forms of knowing and how community engaged scholars are learning to develop a two eyed way of seeing that acknowledges the values and benefits of each system (Martin, 2012). This approach is a cultural form of competence that is developed through embodied practice and the practical engagement with and willingness to learn from a way of being that may be different from one's own.

Students wanting to build capacity in these areas also need a space and contexts (i.e., field) within which such learning can occur. For us, this need for space and context manifests most directly in the CE Office in Saskatoon's inner-city neighborhoods. As such, we would also argue for the value of various forms of embedded CE Offices that can support, cultivate, and promote the interpersonal skills required for successful community-engagement and service-learning. Post-secondary institutions would do well, then, to invest more resources, spaces, CE Offices, and time in preparing students and new researchers with the interpersonal skills and practical, embodied reasoning that allows them to meaningfully engage in community research with many various cultural groups in general, and with Indigenous peoples in particular.

Conclusions

As Thompson and Clark (2013) observe, "building and sustaining an excellent research program demands a range of interpersonal and cognitive skills of leaders and team members" and that "if you cannot work effectively with other people, do not resolve conflict well, or prefer to work alone, your research program may well appear superficially sturdy but will not be built to last" (p. 1,012). As we have illustrated, the interpersonal skills discussed here are best developed over time and with dedicated practice, institutional support, community spaces for reflection, and involvement/immersion within a community context. But this does not mean that these skills are in any way less important than those needed to

develop an interview guide, code a transcript, or aggregate results. Yet, we would go so far as to suggest that without having the interpersonal skills to build a successful relationship, there would be no interview to analyze, no hard data to crunch.

Indeed, in recent years the literature attesting to the importance of interpersonal skills for various domains of scholarly activity has risen (Arrazattee, Lima, & Lundy, 2013; Conville, 2001; Eyler, Giles, & Astin, 1999; Franz, 2009; Franz, 2015; Kajner, 2015; Weerts & Sandmann, 2010). Hackman and Kautz (2012), for example, argue that not only is it becoming clear that standardized achievement tests do not capture interpersonal skill competencies in any meaningful way, but that the presence of such skills are even more predictive of workplace and academic successes than overtly cognitive skills alone. Overall success in life, Hackman and Kautz (2012) contend, "depends on personality traits that are not well captured by measures of cognition. Conscientiousness, perseverance, sociability, and curiosity matter" (p. 452). Echoing this, Tough's (2012) best seller, *How Children Succeed*, contrasted the "cognitive hypothesis" that "success today depends primarily on cognitive skills—the kind of intelligence that gets measured on I.Q. tests" with a new view that success has more to do with interpersonal skills such as perseverance, grit, curiosity, optimism, and self-control (p. 19). The place-based reflections offered by those working and learning at the CE Office in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan add weight to these sentiments and highlight an important need to continue building interpersonal skills that are necessary for meaningful scholarship to occur and flourish. The interpersonal skills discussed here, reflect important aspects of community-engaged scholarship crucial for high-quality, high-impact ethical work to emerge and can lead to the formation of positive, productive, and long lasting relationships with Indigenous community partners in particular, or community partners spanning different cultural and social worlds more generally.

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