



TIMOTHY CURREN

# Learning and Connecting With the Land

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## Table of Contents

Land Acknowledgement .....	01
Recognition and Appreciation .....	01
Section 1: Reflection and Review of Literature .....	02
Methodology .....	02
Introduction .....	02
Urban and Rural Land-based Learning .....	03
Community and Relationships .....	05
Connecting the Disconnect .....	05
Ethical Space .....	06
Colonialism and Decolonization in the Academy .....	07
Well-being & Land-based Learning .....	08
Challenge of Funding Land-based Learning .....	09
Section 2: Moving Forward & Policy Actions .....	10
Purpose .....	10
Shifts and Continuing Efforts (local) .....	10
Indigenous Governance .....	11
Healing with the Land .....	11
Supporting Actions .....	11
System Level Change .....	12
Conclusion .....	12
Section 3: Video Portion: Thinking Through a System Lens .....	13
Appendix: System Maps .....	14
Bibliography .....	16

## Land Acknowledgement

I would like to recognize that I am a settler and guest on Turtle Island, on Treaty 7 territory at Mohkinstis. My roots originate from Britain on my mothers side and Irish-English on my fathers side. Treaty 7 is comprised of the Blackfoot Confederacy, consisting of three Blackfoot Nations, the Siksika, Kainai, and Pikani Nations, as well as the Tsuut'ina First Nation and Stoney First Nations consisting of Bearspaw, Chiniki, and Wesley First Nations. I am grateful to live, learn and grow with the land and recognize that this work carried out in the Catamount Fellowship would not be possible without the land we walk with and the insights of Indigenous peoples.

## Recognition and Appreciation

The work carried out in this report was accomplished in partnership with the land and community. The dedication and commitment of my faculty mentor James Stauch and community partners Melissa Roy and Brett Bairstow at the Aboriginal Friendship Centre of Calgary demonstrated to me the possibility for transformative change and the power of forming relationships in connection with the land. This partnership formed late into the Fellowship after some uncertainty, but with the support of James, Brett and Melissa I was able to produce this report in a good way. It is heartwarming to have worked with individuals who are dedicated to stretching our learning beyond the classroom and connecting with the land. Furthermore, I would like to thank the program coordinators of the Catamount Fellowship, Barb Davies, and Cordeilia Snowdon-Lawley, as well as other faculty members who showed an overwhelming amount of support to help me complete the Catamount Fellowship in a meaningful way.



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## Reflection and Review of Literature

### Methodology

This research report is done in two written sections and one audio/visual part. The written report consists of a review of existing literature and gray literature followed by a critical analysis of land-based learning and pedagogy in post-secondary education from a systems thinking perspective. To honor and respect ethical spaces of engagement and diverse forms of learning, an audio/visual portion is incorporated that brings the words to life and seeks to connect with the land. The intention behind the work is to link learning with the land and to ensure this work is reflected in multiple ways through written and oral formats.

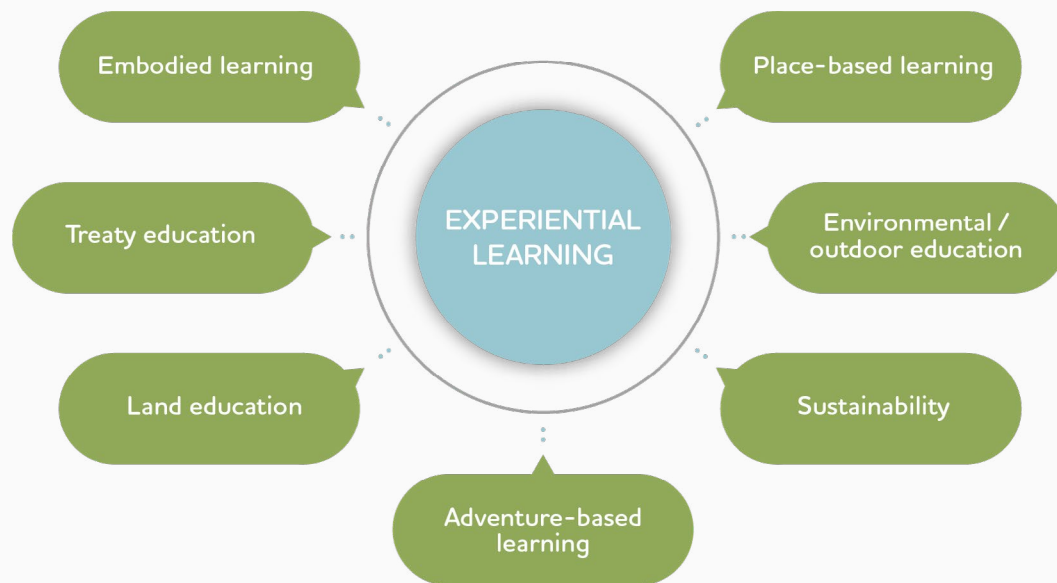
### Introduction

Learning is embedded into life. There are so many ways we learn. One way of learning that I deeply value is through connections and relationships with family and community. Forming new understanding with the sharing of culture, language and existing knowledge through connecting with the land and community is so important in developing a healthy society. Connection with the land is inherently a part of our lifelong learning journey as we all rely on the conditions of our life-sustaining planet to nurture and protect us. Land-based learning is embedded in our everyday lives because the Earth teaches and reminds us, whether we like it or not, that we do not exist without its conditions.

My passion for learning and being outdoors has inspired me to wonder what else we can do other than spend most of our critical learning years in the confines of learning institutions and classrooms. Through this, I have come to realize the importance of land, community, and relationships within our learning and how these aspects must be incorporated. Coming into the Catamount Fellowship with the question I was matched with presented me a significant opportunity to investigate whether this deeply-felt passion was something others were re-discovering, researching and learning as well.

In the first section of this report I will explore a set of seven themes; rural and urban land-based learning, community, relationships, ethical space, colonialism and decolonization, neuroscientific factors, and funding. I will reflect on critical research supporting the need for systemic change in post-secondary education. There are many interesting aspects to be considered from both western and Indigenous sets of knowledge. The literature reviewed will highlight the importance of local culture, knowledge and language, and will draw from both local, national and international literature related to land-based learning especially in a local context.<sup>1</sup> The second section of this report will discuss supporting actions to generate change moving forward together and apply systems thinking to land-based and experiential learning.

<sup>1</sup> Ahnationtalk. *Actua Brings Together Educators and Youth for an Indigenous Land-Based STEM Learning Experience*. NationTalk, 2022.; Absolon, Kathy E.. *Kaandossiwin : how we come to know*. Fernwood. 2011.; Betty, Bastien. & Duane Mistaken Chief. *Blackfoot ways of knowing: The worldview of the Siksikaitsitapi*. University of Calgary Press. Calgary, 2004.; Gawain, Bodkin-Andrews & Carlson, Bronwyn. *The legacy of racism and Indigenous Australian Identity within education*. Race Ethnicity and Education, 2016. DOI: 10.1080/13613324.2014.969224.; CPAWS. Land-based Learning in Mohkinstsis: An Indigenous-led Nature Walk Series. CPAWS Southern Alberta Events. 2022. <https://cpaws-southernalberta.org/land-based-learning-in-mohkinstsis-an-indigenous-led-nature-walk-series/>; Gregory, Cajete & Bear, Leroy Littlebear. *Native science: Natural laws of interdependence* (Vol. 315). Santa Fe, NM: Clear Light Publishers. 2000.



## Urban & Rural Land-based Learning

Land-based learning can be considered within the broader category of experiential learning, which is central to learning throughout life. Experiential learning extends out in a spider web of interconnected components to learning with, and through the land, individual relationships, community interactions, respect and so much more.<sup>2</sup>

The University of British Columbia's experiential learning web is a valuable visual map to express the overall interconnectedness of learning, but also allows a focus on specific components of experiential learning.<sup>3</sup> The UBC model developed by Kari Grain identifies the following components: embodied learning, treaty education, land education, place-based learning, outdoor/environmental education, sustainability, and adventure-based learning.<sup>4</sup> This cluster of experiential learning will be of central importance in this review. However, I feel it is important to consider experiential learning defined broadly as learning through an interconnected set of relationships as an individual in various communities and overall society.<sup>5</sup> By defining experiential learning in this context I find it can help nurture critical dialogue and reflection on how gaining understanding outside of the classroom extends our learning to places we as individuals experience personally and how we connect to all our relations.<sup>6,7</sup>

2 Kari, Grain. *Visualizing a Messy Field: Clusters of Experiential Learning*. CTLT, UBC. 2019. <https://blogs.ubc.ca/experiential/files/2019/03/EL-Visualization-March2019.png>

3 Grain, A *Messy Field, experiential learning 2019*; University of Regina. *University of Regina expands career-ready learning opportunities with the opening of its new Centre for Experiential and Service Learning*. 2022. <https://www.uregina.ca/external/communications/releases/current/nr-11222022.html>

4 Grain, A *Messy Field*, Experiential learning 2019.

5 Betty Bastien & Mistaken Chief. *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing*. 2004.; Betty, Bastien. *Indigenous pedagogy: A way out of dependence*. In K. Burnett & G. Read (Eds.), *Aboriginal history: A reader*. Don Mills, ON.: Oxford University Press. 2016.; Dechinta. *Centre for Research and Learning*. 2022. <https://www.dechinta.ca/>; Marie, Battiste & Jean, Barman (Eds.). *First Nations education in Canada: The circle unfolds*. UBC Press. 1995.; Marie, Battiste & Sheelagh McLean. *State of First Nations learning and education*. Canadian Council on Learning, 2005.; Marie Battiste. *Decolonizing education: Nourishing the learning spirit*. Purich Publishing Limited. 2013.; Willie Ermine et al. *Aboriginal epistemology. First Nations education in Canada: The circle unfolds*, 101-12. 1995.; Willie, Ermine. *Ethical Space of Engagement*. *Indigenous Law Journal*, 6(1), 193-203. 2007. <https://tspace.library.utoronto.ca/bitstream/1807/17129/1/ILJ-6.1-Ermine.pdf>; Leanne Simpson. *Land as pedagogy: Nishnaabeg intelligence and rebellious transformation*. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 3(3), 1-25. 2014. <http://whereareyouquetzalcoatl.com/mesofigurineproject/EthnicAndIndigenousStudiesArticles/Simpson2014.pdf>

6 Absolon. Kaandossiwin. 2011.; John, Borrows. *Outsider education: Indigenous law and land-based learning*. Windsor yb access. 2016. <https://wyaj.uwindsor.ca/index.php/wyaj/article/view/4807>; Michele Tanaka et al. *Transforming pedagogies: pre-service reflections on learning and teaching in an Indigenous world*. *Teacher Development*, 11(1), 99-109. 2007. Ermine. *Ethical space of engagement*. 2007.; Gabrielle Lindstrom et al. *MISAAMOKAKSIN Transitioning and Transforming Treaty-Based Education*. Peigan Board of Education. 2021.; Treaty Elders, Treaty. *The True Spirit and Original Intent of Treaty 7*. Vol. 149. Montreal, CA: McGill-Queen's University Press, 1995.; Treaty 7. <https://www.treaty7.org/> 2022.; University of Saskatchewan. *Indigenous Land-based Education*. M.I.L.B.E. 2023. <https://grad.usask.ca/programs/indigenous-land-based-education.php#Tuition>

7 All our relations refer to our connections with the environment and all that is contained within it, such as our animal kinfolk, other people, trees, rocks, wind, water, etc.

In this report, I define/discuss land-based learning in the context of learning outside the classroom both physically and mentally. This is to identify common themes in the literature expressing the critical need for us as individuals to learn in relation to the land and all that is a part of it.<sup>8</sup> Scholars have placed a high importance on seeking to understand how our current pathways in society interact with the environment and how our ways of learning are harmful as they are rote, performative and appropriative.<sup>9</sup> The traditional western school system does not appear to focus on the importance of being in connection to land and everything that is around it, also known as ‘all our relations’. Both rural and urban contexts of land-based learning are crucial areas in which a variety of forms of learning outside of traditional classroom contexts occur.<sup>10,11</sup> Rural land-based learning differs from urban land-based learning because rural aspects would be more nature based compared with the urban context, which centers more around community elements as the natural landscape itself is more challenging to access. The urban contexts of land-based learning look to generate community connections and allow students to see beyond the classroom and create positive impact by collaborating with community organizations and individuals within the community for more connective and relational learning.<sup>12</sup> Rural land-based learning entails more connective aspects to the environment itself and the importance of being in touch with nature and traditional ways of life, which is critically demonstrated in two recent *In Focus* podcasts on the Aboriginal Peoples Television Network (APTN) demonstrating the impact learning on the land and in the community has for Indigenous youth.<sup>13</sup>

- 8 Absolon. Kaandossiwin. 2011.; Margaret, Kovach. *Indigenous methodologies : characteristics, conversations, and contexts* (Second edition). University of Toronto Press. 2021.; Frances, Rains. *Making Intellectual Space Self-determination and Indigenous Research*. In O. Welch & D. Pollard (Eds), *From Center to Margins: The Importance of Self-Definition in Research*. State University of New York Press. 2006.; Simpson. *Land as Pedagogy*, 2014.; Linda, Smith. *Decolonizing methodologies : research and indigenous peoples* (2nd ed.). Zed Books. 2012.; Tara J. Yosso. *Whose culture has capital? A critical race theory discussion of community cultural wealth*. *Race ethnicity and education*, 8(1), 69-91. 2005.
- 9 Gregory A. Cajete. *Envisioning indigenous education: Applying insights from indigenous views of teaching and learning*. *Handbook of indigenous education*. 2019: 823-845.; Sharilyn, Calliou. *Peacekeeping actions at home: A medicine wheel model for a peacekeeping pedagogy*. *First Nations education in Canada*. In Marie Battiste & Jean Barman (Eds.), *First Nations education in Canada: The circle unfolds* (pp. 47–72). University of British Columbia Press. 1995.; Rosanna Deerschild. *The Mission, philosophy and wisdom of Buffy sainte-marie*. Unreserved, CBC podcast. 2022. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/3CMmEs4bD5CtjPK9OpKb5M> ; Chloe Dragonsmith. *Creating Ethical Spaces: Opportunities to Connect with Land for Life and Learning in the NWT*. The Gordon Foundation. 2020. <https://gordonfoundation.ca/resource/chloe-dragon-smith-policy-paper/> ; Willie Ermine. *Pedagogy from the ethos: An interview with Elder Ermine on language*. In Lenore Stiffarm (Ed.), *As we see ... Aboriginal pedagogy* (pp. 9–28). Saskatoon, SK: University Extension Press, University of Saskatchewan. 1998.; Brian Findsen. *Learning in later life: a bicultural perspective from Aotearoa/New Zealand*. *International Journal of Lifelong Education*, 35(5), 555–568. 2016. <https://doi.org/10.1080/02601370.2016.1224041> ; Brian Findsen et al. *Ma te ora ka mohio / 'Through life there is learning'*. *Australian Journal of Adult Learning*, 57(3), 508–525. 2017.
- 10 Urban and rural land-based learning is nuanced and for the purpose of this report I am choosing to use these definitions. While connections to the land may be less in an urban context, there are still ways in which it can be achieved such as field trips to local parks.
- 11 APTN News. *A look at the importance of land* | InFocus. YouTube. 2022. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aM\\_wE5-46-c&ab\\_channel=APTNNews](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aM_wE5-46-c&ab_channel=APTNNews) ; Leroy Littlebear. *Jagged worldviews colliding*. *Reclaiming Indigenous voice and vision*, 77. 2000.; Blackfoot confederacy. *Siksikaitstiapsi*. 2022. <https://blackfootconfederacy.ca/>; Marlissa Brown. *Reconnecting to our relations: The Need for Formal Land Claim and Self-government Education in the NorthWest Territories*. The Gordon Foundation. 2022. <https://gordonfoundation.ca/resource/marlisa-brown-policy-research/>
- 12 Borrowos. *Outsider education*. 2016; Cajete. *Envisioning Indigenous Education*. 2019; Julie Cruikshank. *Life lived like a story : life stories of three Yukon Native elders*. 1990. ; Marshall Poe (host). *The colonial lens: Analyzing decolonization, reconciliation, and colonialism in Academia*. [Audio podcast episode], *New Books in Critical Theory*. Spotify. 2022. <https://open.spotify.com/episode/0vviQjDvX9lStK3AeJevu4?si=OoMRgOkeSrS1a5if1V0bgg&nd=1>
- 13 APTN News. *InFocus heads out of the studio to learn what a land-based education means* | InFocus. YouTube. 2022. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mN-6KLtBgMI&ab\\_channel=APTNNews](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mN-6KLtBgMI&ab_channel=APTNNews); Jenna Benchechtrit. *Through summer school, Canadian students explore different pathways to higher education*. CBC News. 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/pathways-to-postsecondary-1.6526482> ; Julianna, Scramstad. *Learning to Listen: On Racism and Power in Yukon Education*. The Gordon Foundation. 2020. <https://gordonfoundation.ca/resource/julianna-scrumstad-policy-paper/> ; TsuuT'ina Gunaha Institute. 2022. <https://www.tsuutinagunahainstitute.com/> ; University of Calgary. *Land-based Learning. Undergraduate programs in education*. <https://werklund.ucalgary.ca/undergraduate-programs/student-opportunities/land-based-opportunities/land-based-learning-series>

## Community and Relationships

Our learning is relational and connective no matter what the setting. However, the learning environments we are immersed in for most of our critical learning years from grades K-to-12 through post-secondary education strain the ability to make these relationships, connections and understanding of our responsibilities as individuals within the broader community.<sup>14</sup> The lack of time we spend outdoors compared to in the classroom over these critical learning years does not support lifelong learning outcomes.<sup>15</sup> Rather, traditional education systems tend to be assessment based (“teaching to the test”). Assessment based learning, which is the main focus of the traditional western school system, does not significantly foster community and environmental connections, and we can see much of this disconnect in everyday life.<sup>16</sup> For example with plastic waste pollution of the land, or through a lack of equal access to outdoor spaces both in rural and urban settings.<sup>17</sup> Literature from scholars such as Betty Bastien, Marie Battiste, Willie Ermine, Leanne Simpson and others, all express the importance of learning through local context and the land itself.<sup>18</sup> However, these authors further express the need for positionality to be central in one’s learning journey as it is important for one to know how to act and apply their knowledge and learning to be an agent of change for everyone.<sup>19</sup> For me, reflecting on this literature is essential to understand my settler ancestry and how it has benefited my positioning within a colonial society. Though it is a bit ironic to reflect on the literature instead of being immersed with land and community.

Community and relationships extend to the concept of all our relations in that everything is interconnected, where we all have our individual and collective responsibilities,

and to be reciprocal in our paths forward.<sup>20</sup> The literature and resources explored how land-based learning inherently extends out into the community in both rural and urban contexts. Because of this, relationships to people, other beings and the land itself are critical in our learning processes as there is interaction and forming of knowledge through this process with one another.<sup>21</sup> This means that learning is potentially all around us. Learning in the community and environment generates reciprocity and benefits from the knowledge we are gaining as both individual and collective learners. Connection to the land and community through relationships is significantly expressed in literature from authors such as Betty Bastien, Kathy Absolon, and Leroy Littlebear.<sup>22</sup> Therefore, considering the importance of connection, understanding how disconnection has harmed us is crucial.

## Connecting the Disconnect

I found it important to specifically discuss what much of the literature I have explored identifies as the disconnect present in our learning environments.<sup>23</sup> Much of the learning structures we have fostered are rote and based on standardized learning expectations. There is a critical need to shift learning outcomes to be based on more holistic and lifelong opportunities for learning.<sup>24</sup> Current learning systems are primarily centered around schooling until a point is reached where you must enter the “adult working world”. Modernist and industrial approaches and the period of settler colonialism are deeply ingrained in the capitalistic and globalist society we live in today. It is reflected through the political, economic, and social systems that influence our everyday lives.

14 Bastien. *A way out of dependence*. 2016.; Battiste. *State of First Nations Learning*. 2005; Marie Battiste & James Youngblood. Naturalizing Indigenous knowledge in Eurocentric education. *Canadian Journal of Native Education*, 32(1), 5-15. 2009.; Gabrielle Lindstrom. *Trauma and Resilience in Aboriginal Adult Learners’ Post-Secondary Experience*. University of Calgary, Graduate Studies. 2018.; Michele, Tanaka et al. *Transforming pedagogies: pre-service reflections on learning and teaching in an Indigenous world*. *Teacher Development*, 11(1), 99-109. 2007.

15 Bastien. *A way out of dependence*. 2016.; Battiste. *State of First Nations Learning*. 2005.

16 Tanaka et al. *Transforming pedagogies: pre-service reflections on learning and teaching*.

17 Conversation in community expressed these sentiments toward not having access to meaningful outdoors spaces that are free of pollution and feel limited in their ability to make meaningful change due to a lack of tools and resources in current learning environments.

18 Bastien & Mistaken Chief. *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing*. 2004; Littlebear. *Jagged Worldviews*. 2000.; Bastien & Barman. *The Circle unfolds*. 1995. Willie Ermine. 1995, 1998, 2007. The three articles from Ermine significantly highlight positionality and its importance in ethical space.; First Nations Pedagogy. Sitemap. 2017 <https://firstnationspedagogy.com/sitemap.html>; Paolina Seitz & S. Laurie Hill. *Language, Culture, and Pedagogy: A Response to a Call for Action*. University of Regina. 2019. <https://journals.uregina.ca/ineducation/article/view/444/997>; Simpson. *Land as pedagogy* 2014.

19 Absolon. Kaandossiwin. 2011.; Bastien & Mistaken Chief. *Blackfoot ways of knowing*. 2004.; Vicki, Bouvier. *KAA-WAAKOHTOOCHIK: The Ones Who are Related to Each other*. 2022. <https://www.livingmichif.com/literature-review>; Ermine. *Ethical Space*. 2007; Littlebear. *Jagged Worldviews*. 2000; Simpson. *Land as pedagogy*. 2014.

20 Absolon. Kaandossiwin. 2011.; Cajete. *Envisioning Indigenous Education*. 2019. Treaty 7. 2022 <https://www.treaty7.org/>; Chelsea Vowel. *Buffalo is the new buffalo, [Dirty Wings]*, p.115-128, Arsenal pulp Press. 2022.; Matthew Wildcat et al. *Learning from the land: Indigenous land based pedagogy and decolonization*. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society*, 3(3). 2014.

21 Absolon. Kaandossiwin. 2011.; Kovach. *Indigenous methodologies*. 2021.; Vowel. *Buffalo is the new Buffalo*. 2022.

22 Absolon. Kaandossiwin. 2011.; Bastien & Mistaken chief. *Blackfoot ways of knowing*. 2004.; Littlebear. *Jagged worldviews*. 2000.

23 The disconnect is between the value and importance of land and how we come to be through our learning. The western school system does not encourage the connection to land or community, rather it deploys assessment based learning practices.

24 Bastien & Mistaken Chief. *Blackfoot ways of knowing*. 2004.; Cajete. *Envisioning Indigenous Education*. 2019; Simpson. *Land as pedagogy*. Yosso. *Whose culture has capital?*. 2005. This is an important article on gaining insight into the impacts of white dominated society and consideration of cultural values as well.

The ideologies of western thought, and the perception of other cultures' knowledge as inferior, contribute significantly to our schooling systems' perspectives on learning and development.<sup>25</sup> Perceiving land as a resource, and people as both commodities and (merely or mainly as) productive workers, a perception that has intensified over time, especially in the 20th and 21st centuries, helps explain why society is so individualized and increasingly disconnected from the environment and all our relations.<sup>26</sup>

The lack of direct links to the land in our learning has left society largely disconnected from our broader environments.<sup>27</sup> This is not only harmful to us as individuals, but also to the environment as we continue down destructive paths that impact the air, land and water. Learning approaches are not effectively supporting efforts of change in the environment and society. To stop heading down these destructive paths, learning with the land and community is crucial.<sup>28</sup> Literature from Indigenous scholars demonstrates the need to shift our learning practices to recognize the many ways of learning and the immense amount of knowledge present across all cultures both local and global.<sup>29</sup> Overall, I found the literature to highlight a need to find congruence and connection in our communities and relationships, especially in the context of Indigenous and western knowledge and learning paradigms.<sup>30</sup>

## Ethical Space

The ethical space of engagement is central to moving forward together and achieving reconciliation through learning that is not rote, performative, or appropriative. The ethical space of engagement is a term coined by Willie Ermine. It was originally formed from Roger Poole's interpretations of two distinctly opposing cultures -



even those at war- sitting on a bench in silence, and in this space on the bench something had formed between two diametrically opposed individuals, which can be conceptualized as the ethical space of engagement.<sup>31</sup>

In the context of learning at the post-secondary level, the ethical space of engagement calls for our learning institutions to act ethically in their engagement with Indigenous knowledge, culture, and language. The ethical space is intended to recognize how western institutions have been poised in colonial authority over the sites in which learning, and knowledge is produced.<sup>32</sup> Both Indigenous and western streams of thought are paralleled within the ethical space. The importance of the ethical space of engagement is that it poses both western and Indigenous knowledge in the context of balance, reflexivity, and humility toward each other's knowledge systems.<sup>33</sup> The literature is extensive on ethical spaces of engagement both in Indigenous and western contexts, which serve to illustrate and support approaches that are bicultural and multicultural, as well as based in actionable approaches where western society is taking the responsibility to enact change in its relationship with Indigenous communities.<sup>34</sup>

25 Marie, Battiste. *Decolonizing education: Nourishing the learning spirit*. Purich Publishing Limited. 2013.

26 Scholars such as Marie Battiste and Betty Bastien and others express this throughout a number of their works in certain ways. Additionally, conversation with the community supported these attitudes in society.

27 Battiste. *Decolonizing Education*. 2013.; Rains. *Making intellectual space*. 2006.; Wright. *No more pencils*. 2000.

28 Simpson. *Land as pedagogy*. 2014.; Yosso. *Whose culture has capital?*. 2005.; Wright. *No more pencils*. 2000.

29 Bastien & Mistaken Chief. *Blackfoot ways of knowing*. 2004; Findsen. *Learning in later life*. 2016.; Linda Smith. *Decolonizing Methodologies*. 2012.

30 Absolon. *Kaandossiwin*. 2011; Simpson. *Land as pedagogy*. 2014.

31 Ermine. *Ethical space of engagement*. 2007 Helps to conceptualize a way in which two or more cultures can meaningfully interact in a space of understanding, respect, humility and connection.; Ermine. *Pedagogy from the ethos*. 1998, an essential conversation with Willie Ermine and Elder Ermine, talking about the critical need to look inward and where one comes from in order to enter into ethical space (9-28). ; Dragon Smith. *Creating Ethical Space*. 2020.

32 Ermine. *Ethical Space of Engagement*. 2007; Dragon Smith. *Creating Ethical Space*. 2020.

33 Dragon Smith. *Creating Ethical Space*. 2020.; 2018-2019 Jane Glassco Northern Fellowship. *Jane Glassco Northern Fellowship 2018-2019: Policy Recommendation*. 2020. <https://gordonfoundation.ca/resource/jgnf-2018-2019-compendium/>

34 Ermine. *Ethical Space of Engagement*. 2007.; Findsen. *Learning in later Life*. 2016. These articles express themes of humility and connection.



## Colonialism and Decolonization in the Academy

The history of learning and education in North America is steeped in dark legacies of indoctrinating and lying to settler society while Indigenous nations were facing the erasure of their culture and identity through genocide that consisted of disease, forced relocation, starvation, and control over social and political systems and more.<sup>35</sup> The education system for settler society during the 20th century entailed history as written by the 'victor', while Indigenous perspectives were actively diminished and even made illegal through policies denying the practice of culture, and language through the Indian Act of 1876 and subsequent amendments.<sup>36</sup> A nation just beginning to truthfully acknowledge acts of genocide with much, if not all, of its colonial authority intact relies upon learning institutions to continue providing beneficial workers for the economy.<sup>37</sup> This is not what the true nature of learning in the academy seeks as it offers a space for freedom of thought and critical thinking to foster engaged citizens who aim to make a positive impact on society.<sup>38</sup> More recently, learning in the academy has become more focused on producing workers for the economy due to political and social forces.<sup>39</sup> Colonial authority is overtly inserted through continued control of knowledge and the sites of learning due to white/male/cis dominated positions of

power in our systems. However, this is an issue engrained in systemic and institutionalized racism that predates the model of post-secondary western scholarship.<sup>40</sup> The history of disenfranchisement of Indigenous peoples, the continued lack of culturally appropriate curriculum, white-dominated positions and colonial attitudes within western institutions continue to allow for western knowledge to pose itself as "superior".<sup>41</sup>

Pathways to decolonizing the academy and even the existing outdoor education programs within the academy have been underway for some time.<sup>42</sup> Critical aspects that are supporting decolonization and intersectional initiatives to address significant barriers created by our existing learning structures stem from Indigenous communities, faculty and students, elders, and allies. The 94 Calls to Action from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRCC),<sup>43</sup> and international policies like the United Nations Declaration on The Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)<sup>44</sup> would not have been formed without significant advocacy and social movements from Indigenous communities. These both highlight the importance of colonial nations to take appropriate action in deconstructing the colonial policies and institutions that continue to oppress the voices and culture of Indigenous peoples and nations on Turtle Island.<sup>45</sup>

35 Bastien & Mistaken Chief. *Blackfoot Ways of knowing*. 2004.; Battiste. *Decolonizing education. Nourishing the learning spirit*. 2013.; Simpson. *Land as pedagogy*. 2014.

36 Government of Canada. (1985). *The Indian act. Government of Canada justice law website*. 1985. <https://laws-lois.justice.gc.ca/eng/acts/i-5/>

37 Bob Joseph. *21 things you may not know about the Indian Act : helping Canadians make reconciliation with indigenous peoples is a reality*. Indigenous Relations Press. 2018.; Government of Canada. *The Indian Act 1985; Bill C-33; First Nations Control of First Nations Education Act*. First Reading April 10, 2014, Second Session. Parliament of Canada. 2014. <https://www.parl.ca/DocumentViewer/en/41-2/bill/C-33/first-reading>.; Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRCC). (2015). *TRC Calls to Action*. TRCC. 2015. [https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/indigenous-people/aboriginal-peoples-documents/calls\\_to\\_action\\_english2.pdf](https://www2.gov.bc.ca/assets/gov/british-columbians-our-governments/indigenous-people/aboriginal-peoples-documents/calls_to_action_english2.pdf)

38 Cajete: *Envisioning Indigenous Education & Simpson. Land as pedagogy reflect flaws within western education and express the need to connect back to the land as a fundamental part of life and learning*.

39 Dragon smith. *Creating Ethical Spaces*, 2020.; Dechinta Centre for research and learning.; University of Victoria. <https://www.uvic.ca/>

40 Bastien & Mistaken chief. *Blackfoot ways of knowing*. 2004.; Dragon Smith. *Creating Ethical Spaces*. 2020.

41 Government of Canada. *Indian Act 1985*. Bill C-33; Lindstrom et al. *MISAAMOKAKSIN*. 2021; Rains. *Making intellectual space*. 2006.

42 Dechinta Centre For Research and Learning. 2023. *Is a key institute in Northern Canada that utilizes land-based pedagogy*; Red Crow Community College. *Realize your potential within our community. Red Crow Community College*. 2022. from <https://www.redcrowcollege.com/> . A Community College Near Lethbridge and utilizes Blackfoot epistemology.; University of Victoria <https://www.uvic.ca/> . Has various community engaged and Indigenous-led programs.

43 The 94 Calls to Action set out recommendations that guide the process to starting reconciliation with Indigenous peoples of Canada.

44 *United Nations Declaration on The Rights Of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)*. 2007. [https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP\\_E\\_web.pdf](https://www.un.org/development/desa/indigenouspeoples/wp-content/uploads/sites/19/2018/11/UNDRIP_E_web.pdf) . International law that Canada has begun to adopt, however Canadian common law holds greater authority still.

45 UNDRIP and the Calls to Action seek to assert Indigenous Sovereignty in Turtle Island. These actions can continue to significantly disrupt State power and influence.

There are many examples of land-based learning initiatives from Canadian institutions such as University of Victoria, Yukon University, Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning, University of Alberta and the University of Saskatchewan, among others. These infuse Indigenous ways of knowing and pedagogies that support ethical and often highly impactful changemaking-oriented programs and initiatives. One example that stands out are the efforts made by the province of Saskatchewan and the federal government to invest in new infrastructure to host Indigenous land-based learning.<sup>46</sup> Mount Royal University has also been engaging in initiatives by connecting with the community directly to support Indigenous students and by

taking steps to pursue actionable decolonization through Indigenous leadership and guidance.<sup>47</sup> However, there are continued shortcomings within western institutions as there are many factors and aspects of the undercurrent,<sup>48</sup> that prevents serious actionable change.<sup>49</sup> It is important for major post-secondary institutions to form connections with local community colleges such as Red Crow Community College, which implements Blackfoot ways of knowing and has connections with local universities such as University of Calgary and Bow Valley College as they are engaging with diverse forms of learning.<sup>50,51</sup>

University of Victoria

Yukon University

Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning

University of Alberta

University of Saskatchewan

Mount Royal University

## Well-being & Land-based Learning

Neuroscience from both western and Indigenous sources shows the importance of connecting our learning to the land and community. The literature reviewed expressed the importance of health and well-being by connecting with land throughout our everyday lives. Learning through interconnections and the land has benefits for lifelong learning and one's ability to interact with our world.<sup>52</sup> Taking this into consideration, there is a need to support a shift in our learning structures and outcomes to be based in more holistic and lifelong learning. Building a wide range of an individual's social, emotional, and practical skills to be an active critical thinker in society looking to create positive change for all. These objectives are not generated in traditional classroom learning, rather they are fostered in conditions of relationship to the environment and directly experiencing community around us.<sup>53</sup>

46 Ahnationtalk. *Canada and Saskatchewan invest in infrastructure projects to strengthen communities*. Nation talk. 2023. <https://nationtalk.ca/story/canada-and-saskatchewan-invest-in-infrastructure-projects-to-strengthen-communities>

47 Trico Change Maker Studio. Mount Royal University, Calgary Alberta. 2023. <https://www.tricochangemakersstudio.ca/>. A place for community engagement and interconnections on Mount Royal University Campus.

48 The Undercurrent is referenced in Ermine. *Ethical space of engagement*. 2007. The undercurrent describes the status quo, or the aspects of society that pull you along and the resistance can be too much so you have no choice. Unless you resist the undercurrent that is.

49 Liny Lambernick. *Yellowknife City Council signs memo for university on Tin Can Hill*. CBC News. 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/north/yellowknife-council-tin-can-memo-1.6480131?cmp=rss>; Dechinta Centre for research and Learning. ; Ermine. *The ethical space of engagement*. 2007. ; Mount Royal University 2023. ; University of Calgary. *Land-based Learning. Undergraduate programs in education*. <https://werklund.ucalgary.ca/undergraduate-programs/student-opportunities/land-based-opportunities/land-based-learning-series>. This highlights various institutions and programs that implement land-based and Indigenous pedagogy.

50 Mount Royal University had connections with Red Crow Community College when it was a college but as a university these connections have been less present if at all as mentioned in Bastien & Mistaken chief. *Blackfoot Ways of knowing*. 2004.

51 It is also important to recognize there are other community colleges such as Old Sun Community College on Siksika nation <http://oldsuncollege.ca/>, Yellowhead Tribal College located on Treaty 6 Territory <https://ytced.ab.ca/>, Maskwacis Cultural college located in Maskwacis <https://www.mccedu.ca/>

52 Andrea Bowra et al. *Indigenous learning on Turtle Island: A review of the literature on land-based learning*. The Canadian Geographer, 65(2), 132–140. 2021. <https://doi.org/10.1111/cag.12659>; Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning. ; Mark Hathaway et al. *Nurturing Ecological Consciousness*. In *Health in the Anthropocene* (pp. 323–338). University of Toronto Press. 2020. <https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487533410-022>; Michelle Johnson-Jennings et al. *Returning to Our Roots: Tribal Health and Wellness through Land-Based Healing*. *Genealogy* (Basel), 4(3). 2020. <https://doi.org/10.3390/genealogy4030091>. These sources reflect ecology and the importance of interconnections for health and well-being especially mind, body and spirit.

53 Battiste. *Decolonizing education*. 2013; Jenna Benchechtrit. *Through summer school, Canadian students explore different pathways to higher education*. CBC News. 2022. <https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/pathways-to-postsecondary-1.6526482>; Sask Polytech. *New Indigenous Outdoor Learning Centre launches in northern Saskatchewan*. Saskatchewan Polytechnic. 2022. <https://saskpolytech.ca/news/posts/2022/new-indigenous-outdoor-learning-centre-launches-in-northern-saskatchewan.aspx>; Tanaka et al. *Transforming pedagogies*. 2007.



Land-based learning shows how generating a connection to the environment and our peers allows for us as individuals to better learn and understand our responsibilities toward all our relations.<sup>54</sup> Our everyday educational practices and habits can be more based on learning and development in relation to the land and all that is around us rather than being focused on more economic and skill-based outcomes. Learning in land-based contexts, both rural and urban, generates real-world context and relationships where multi-stakeholder engagement occurs and learning structures become more organic and fluid as they move away from being isolated in a classroom desk environment. In this learning environment, hierarchy begins to dissolve as multiple members of the community take on roles of learning and educating each other and sharing knowledge with youth as well.<sup>55</sup> Generating connection in our learning links individual learners' experiences with relationships to better form their understanding of responsibility and reciprocity in our learning.

## Challenge of Funding Land-based Learning

Funding for land-based learning is in short supply. This is because priorities around funding create barriers for effective and meaningful action in decolonizing and creating ethical spaces within the academy.<sup>56</sup> This is due to government influence over university funding, and the fact that land-based learning is viewed as co-curricular as opposed to core learning outcomes and programs. I found this is a common barrier cited through much of the literature as policies and procedures around the operations of an institution generate further hesitancy to take action that completely dissolves an institution's authority of research and teaching based on risk assessment.<sup>57</sup> It is critical for institutions to willingly take steps into uncertainty and challenge current norms by addressing barriers to bolster decolonizing initiatives and support Indigenous governance and involvement in creating systemic change within our learning. The focus and concern around budgetary issues, the cost of learning outside the institution's classrooms and the unpredictable nature of learning within the community are barriers to significant advancement in land-based learning.

54 Bastien & Mistaken Chief. *Blackfoot Ways of Knowing*. 2004. ; Little Bear. *Jagged Worldviews*. 2000; Simpson. *Land as pedagogy*. 2014.

55 Findsen. *Learning in later life*. 2016; Lindstrom et al. *MISAAMOKAKSIN*. 2021.

56 Rains. *Making intellectual Space*. 2006.; Wildcat et al. *land-based learning*. 2014.; Bouvier. *KAA-WAAKOHTOOCHIK*. 2022.

57 Derrek Bentley et al. *British Colonialism: Perpetuating Structural Violence Through Perceptual Misunderstandings in Canada*. *Peace Research*, 49(2), 61- 78. 2017. <http://www.jstor.org.ezproxy.uleth.ca/stable/44779907>. ; Ermine. *Ethical Space of Engagement*. 2007; Rains. *Making intellectual space*. 2006. Bentley and Ermine highlight the control academic institutions have over research and teaching practice rather than the community and how this negatively affects community in relation to teaching, learning and research.

# Section 2

## Moving forward & Policy Actions

### Purpose

The purpose of this section is to reflect on the critical importance of connecting to the land and considers how post-secondary education is shifting to incorporate broader perspectives more significantly on land-based and experiential learning. It will examine what universities and other post-secondary institutions are doing to engage the broader community through local partnerships and community-engaged research on the land. The actions taken through community engagement are critical for post-secondary institutions as it acknowledges the land and local culture, language and knowledge.

Post-secondary education has been a space for both the growth and development of knowledge and has voiced the importance of critical thought and academic freedom. However, post-secondary education has also constructed barriers for knowledge outside of western scholarship (consciously and unwittingly) and has and continues to exclude Indigenous peoples respective knowledge, culture and language systems as well as access to these spaces without being disenfranchised.<sup>58</sup> By considering what post-secondary education has done to shift and continue incorporating broader perspectives on research, learning and knowledge it shows how progress is happening and further reveals that barriers are causing educators and learners to get creative.

### Shifts and Continuing Efforts (local context)

Post-secondary education has without a doubt focused more on written and classroom-based forms of learning and assessment, rather than going beyond this traditional western learning format to embrace broader perspectives, especially local knowledge, language and culture.<sup>59</sup> Field study programs and other forms of more experiential or land-based learning are constrained to the academic focus and less on forming meaningful lifelong relationships. However, change is happening! There are several exemplars leading the way to transformative change such as Dechinta Centre for Research & Scholarship in Yellowknife, which offers land-based learning education and research, the University of Victoria in British Columbia that has built local partnerships with Indigenous communities and Mount Royal University's Catamount Fellowship that allows community organizations to access and benefit from post-secondary research resources.<sup>60</sup> This is a part of forming a shift in our learning institutions and to connect with the communities and people who are a part of the post-secondary system.

Post-secondary education reflects a system that is facing potential for great change, but the barriers that stand in the way are deeply ingrained in the norms and practices of western scholarship. The lack of funding, risk assessment concerns, and the resources needed to effectively develop more in-depth experiential and land-based learning are a few of the barriers post-secondary institutions face when aiming to center local Indigenous knowledge, language and culture.<sup>61</sup> Community-engaged research, learning spaces and practices are necessary to align agents of change and in critical positions of power to allow for growth to occur.<sup>62</sup>

58 Bastien & Mistaken Chief. *Blackfoot ways of knowing*. 2004. ; Poe. *The colonial lens*. 2022.; Rains. *Making intellectual space*. 2006.; Tanaka et al. *Transforming pedagogies*. 2007.

59 Battiste. *Indigenous Knowledge foundations*. 2005.; Finsden. *Ma te ora ka mohio*. 2017.

60 Dechinta Centre for research and learning. University of Victoria.

61 Simpson. *Land as pedagogy*. 2014.

62 Battiste. *Decolonizing Education*. 2013. ; Vowel. *Buffalo is the new Buffalo*. 2022.

## Indigenous Governance

A key factor that is beginning to be taken more seriously is including Indigenous leadership in the programming of curriculum and research practices. Actions of decolonization and indigenization have largely been performative by post-secondary institutions while the western-centric learning system remains dominant.<sup>63</sup> Incorporating Indigenous culture, knowledge and language into our learning spaces is a part of generating actionable change. It supports the efforts to challenge the mainstream learning practices of western institutions. Connecting to the land helps bring an understanding to the importance of care and connection we must have with all our relations, especially the land and environment.

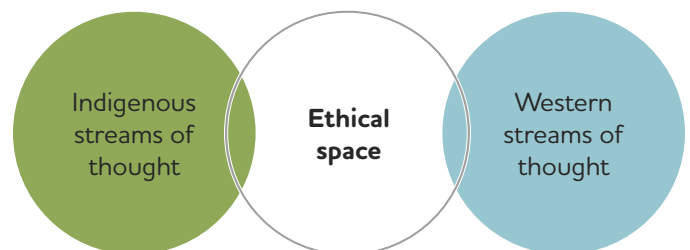
## Healing with the Land

By focusing our learning and development around the land, society as a whole and individuals within society can benefit as this reconnection results in greater stewardship of our natural environment.<sup>64</sup> In our current traditional western learning systems we have lost sight of the land, which provides us with our existence and ability to form knowledge and an understanding of what is around us. Overtime, and especially during this research journey I have realized how disconnected humanity is from nature. It has created major disruption in the natural setting that nurtures us, and we must come to understand healing with the land through learning and connecting with it through all our relations.<sup>65</sup>

## Supporting Actions

- Embrace interconnectedness with community and post-secondary institutions by fostering an environment for community engaged research.
- Form reciprocal and collaborative programs, resources and research to benefit the community and grow relationships across communities and institutions.
  - Have the necessary infrastructure, people, and resources to support a continued effort toward community and land relationships.

- **Creating better access to land-based/experiential resources and programs within an institution. Achieving this through**
  - Funding and resourcing field trips to nature and community organizations.
  - Forming a holistic mindset of learning and engaging with land.
    - Building health and well-being in the community through our places of learning.
    - Integrating broad perspectives into programs to incorporate local knowledge, language and culture as well as international perspectives.
    - Forming ethical spaces to embrace broad and open minded critical perspectives.
  - Addressing current constraints around challenges of enabling broader learning experiences.
- **Form ethical space between Western and Indigenous streams of thought.**
  - Creating parallel programs that work to integrate both Indigenous and western streams of thought.
  - Creating space for Indigenous-led and allied research programs.



63 Bastien & Mistaken Chief. *Blackfoot ways of knowing*. 2004 ; Battiste. *Decolonizing education*. 2013.

64 Bowra et al. *Indigenous learning on Turtle Island*. 2021; Hathaway et al. *Nurturing ecological consciousness*. 2020. ; Johnson-Jennings et al. *Returning to our roots*. 2020.

65 Bowra et al. *Indigenous learning on Turtle Island*. 2021; Hathaway et al. *Nurturing ecological consciousness*. 2020. ; Johnson-Jennings et al. *Returning to our roots*. 2020.

## System Level Change

Post-secondary education is a critical space for learning and forming new knowledge and to support this it must embrace culturally diverse perspectives. Without this, there is a lack of acceptance and acknowledgement of knowledge outside of the western paradigm.<sup>66</sup> A critical starting point is the land and how centering land allows institutions to embrace and engage with local Indigenous knowledge, culture and language and form more integral relationships between community and post-secondary institutions.

Systems level change happens through aligning agents of change and working together to strengthen community and incorporate broad perspectives of learning in post-secondary. This is something that I have learned significantly over the course of the Catamount Fellowship by engaging with the community and reflecting with the land. It is not easy to generate systemic change as there is much uncertainty, however this discomfort is necessary to align agents of change.

Reflection and conversation with the community is another key component for meaningful change. Transformation occurs when community members have the opportunity to drive change in spaces of power and knowledge, which I have come to learn through the work done in this report. Change does not happen without people coming together and understanding that pieces of a system or the entire system is not working and then taking meaningful action.

## Conclusion

In reviewing the literature that I have gathered through the research process; I have gained critical and reflective insights as to how we might take our learning beyond the classroom. Getting creative with our classroom designs and pedagogies or getting out onto the land and working with community organizations and community members would allow for enriched learning experiences to build a society of active agents of change.<sup>67</sup> The themes explored aim to reflect critical aspects to enable system change in post-secondary learning and learning as a whole. I highlighted and prioritized local Indigenous knowledge as well as international Indigenous perspectives throughout this report. Western literature, both in colonial and decolonial contexts,<sup>68</sup> were also assessed to demonstrate the wide range of initiatives that are ongoing in addressing barriers and harms generated by colonialism. I have begun to gain a better understanding of steps that can be taken through learning and education that take us beyond the classroom and make us look inward at ourselves and the connections we must have to everything around us.<sup>69</sup> Stepping into the unknown and learning through experience and relationships must come by seeing each other's culture, language, and knowledge respectfully and meaningfully.

66 Bastien & Mistaken Chief. *Blackfoot ways of knowing*. 2004.; Finsden. *Ma te ora ka mohio*. 2017.

67 Dechinta Centre for research and learning. ; Simpson. *Land as pedagogy*. 2014; Little Bear. *Jagged Worldview*. 2000.; Tanaka et al. *Transforming pedagogies* 2007.

68 This refers to the use of literature based in the western scope of research and ethics and how some articles are more based in this traditional practice of producing scholarly work, where many articles highlighted such as Tanaka. *Transforming Pedagogies*. 2007. Demonstrate going against the status quo in research and learning within post-secondary institutions.

69 Ermine. *Ethical Space of Engagement*. 2007; Little bear. *Jagged Worldviews*. 2000.

# Section 3

## Video Portion of Scholarly Output

### Thinking Through a Systems Lens

This section takes a system thinking approach while intentionally being out with the land and speaking with the land. It is important to learn in conversation and to listen to the voices around us for change that stems from land and community. Bringing the research and conversation in the community to life through this portion of the report looks to inspire other educators, researchers and scholars to think differently and be different to bring positive change for all.

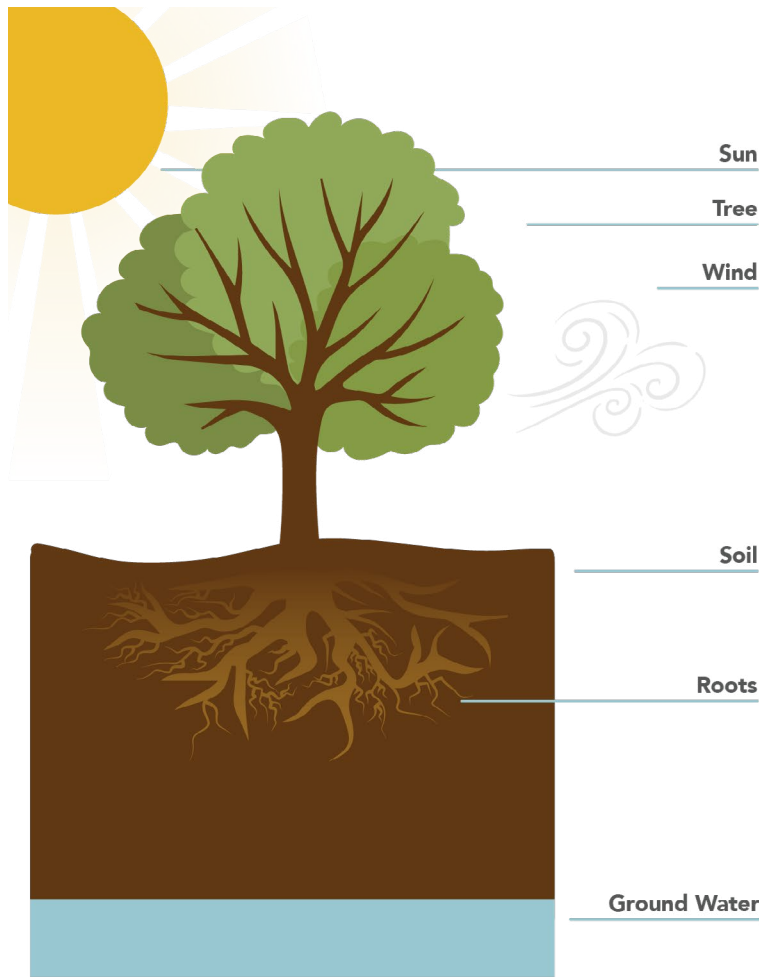


### Connecting with the land

Connectwithland <https://youtu.be/Ak2h6zAf2BU>

# Appendix

## System Maps



### Events

- Post secondary
- Land-based programming
- Experiential
- Decolonization
- DEI (Diversity Equity and Inclusion)
- 2SLGBTQ+ rights
- Community research
- Indigenous education
- Reconciliation
- UNDRIP
- 94 Calls to action

### Patterns

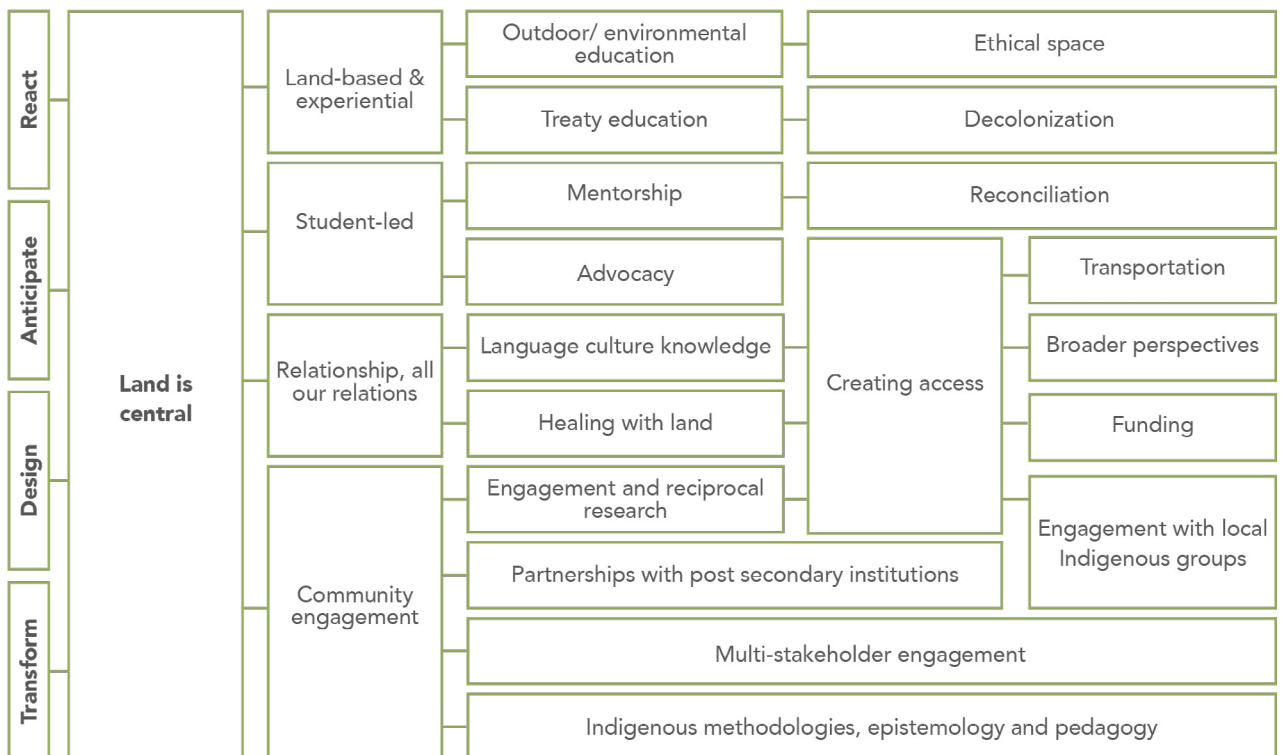
- Learning assessment
- Western centric
- Performative action
- Written form
- Critical learning

### Structures

- Western ethics
- Learning norms
- Policy and learning practises
- Land/environment
- Indigenous pedagogies and ontologies

### Mental Models

- Relational, disconnect
- Colonialism
- Institutional racism
- Working society
- Language, culture, knowledge
- All our relations





Challenge Mapping	Impact Gaps	Solutions Mapping
<p>What is happening? What is the impact of the challenge? What is holding the challenge in place?</p> <p>The challenge is to significantly embrace broader perspectives of learning at post secondary, especially Indigenous learning and education.</p> <p>Community experiences barriers to access learning, and development outside of a western lens.</p> <p>Multi-stakeholder engagement and embracing, diverse ways of learning, benefits, communities, non-profit organisations and institutions. Barriers continue to exist such as western centred learning, and capitalist/colonialist structures.</p> <p>The path to reconciliation is gaining ground. Disruption and discomfort is occurring, which is generating greater potential for change.</p>	<p>Systemic barriers such as, racism, colonialism, and western-centric institutions and knowledge systems continue to impede progress for incorporating broader perspectives into post-secondary spaces of learning.</p> <p>Institutional and systemic barriers such as racism, assessment based learning and western centric knowledge systems. Local Indigenous perspectives need to be more significantly embraced in post-secondary institutions. Greater community engagement and inclusion in governance through elder councils, land based programming and language courses would support more Indigenous education and knowledge in these sites of learning.</p> <p>Addressing power imbalances between communities and post-secondary institutions.</p> <p>Engaging communities to generate reciprocity, reconciliation and resilience in implementing meaningful connections between post-secondary institutions and communities.</p>	<p>What models are actually being tried? What is working? What is not? What resources are available?</p> <p>Institutions have been connecting with the community through multi-stakeholder engagement. Achieving this through connections with local Indigenous communities and Elders, non-profit organisations, corporations, and other partners. It has enabled communities and organisations greater access to spaces of learning, however western centred learning remains deeply embedded.</p> <p>Environmental and ecological healing across the globe closely relates to learning and connection to community.</p> <p>Community engagement and focusing on connections to the land are working. Barriers such as funding, commitment and transportation limit more significant and lasting connections.</p> <p>Local Indigenous relationships and connections and implementation of broader perspectives into spaces of learning and teaching.</p>

### Learning Log and Actions

By connecting with community, educators, learners, the land, and animals I built significant understanding to the importance of remaining connected with all our relations.

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