

Indigenizing Library Spaces Using Photovoice Methodology

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Figure 1. “Here are my boots.” Indigenous student photo



“Here are my boots. I just put myself in that space. There is space for me on these shelves. There is lots of room on these shelves. Doesn’t have to be a book. There are other ways of learning, other ways of knowing, other ways of doing. I can fit right in here. And my brothers and sisters can fit right in here provided we are given the space to do so.” Indigenous student, University of Calgary

We acknowledge the traditional territories of the people of the Treaty 7 region in Southern Alberta, which includes the Blackfoot Confederacy (comprising the Siksika, Piikani, and Kainai First Nations), as well as the Tsuut’ina First Nation, and the Stoney Nakoda (including the Chiniki, Bearspaw, and Wesley First Nations). The City of Calgary is also home to Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3, Canada.

I. Introduction

Student learning is enhanced when they have a sense of belonging, comfort, and representation.¹ Libraries are some of the most popular and well-used spaces on campus, where students are welcome to congregate and engage in activities that support their learning. While libraries have made great efforts to become more open and welcoming, not all students necessarily feel they can make the library their learning space. The quote and photo above are from an Indigenous student who feels that they should belong while recognizing that the library has a way to go to make that happen.

The purpose of our study was to explore and understand how Indigenous undergraduate students experience their learning within informal library spaces and other spaces on campus. While this is a work in progress and our results are preliminary, we have learned much about ourselves, the students, and our

spaces. The students invited us to view their learning through their lens, and our learning has been powerful. The final results will inform and identify steps that the library might take to make the informal learning spaces more supportive of Indigenous students' learning. The results so far indicate that this is a project that will reshape our perspective on learning spaces in the library. In this paper we will discuss our methodology, our process of working together "in a good way," key findings, and next steps in the project. You will read the Indigenous students' words and see their photographs that informed this study.

II. Background

The Taylor Family Digital Library (TFDL) opened in 2011. It was designed with flexible learning spaces, where students can choose to work in an area that matches their preferred way of learning (lounge-like open spaces, study cubicles, quiet reading rooms, consult workrooms, and even coffee areas). Beatty conducted a study of undergraduates in the TFDL, using interviews and photo-elicitation to determine "the features in open learning spaces that assist students in learning."² She discovered students choose where to learn based on their conceptions of comfort, distraction levels, time priorities, and type of work. As Beatty concludes, "The correlation of type of space, type of activity and their way of learning enable them to be comfortable and open to learning."³

When the University released its Indigenous Strategy, *ii' taa'poh'to'p*, in 2017, it provided a different lens through which to view student learning. One of its stated commitments is to establish "a welcoming, inclusive, and culturally competent campus community that respects, includes, and promotes Indigenous ways of knowing, teaching, learning and research."⁴ Inspired by the report and sensing a need to change, we wondered, "Where do our Indigenous students learn outside of the classroom? What are their experiences of learning within a modern glass building like the TFDL?"

The University of Calgary's Indigenous Strategy addresses ways of connecting. Discussion on space and place center around Indigenousizing the "physical infrastructure, landscape and spaces across campus, through buildings, art, walking trails, and increased ceremonial spaces. The buildings should be a part of the landscape, rather than the other way around."⁵ Brooke notes that Aboriginal identity is "virtually invisible" in Canada's places of governance and education. He further asks, "what does belonging look like if nothing of your culture, history, language or art is visible in the streets, parks, and buildings where you live and work—how can you ever feel welcome there?"⁶ These are the same questions we asked ourselves. As librarians and an educational developer, we want to understand Indigenous students' learning and their lived experience of informal learning spaces. We want to support their success as learners through their university journey.

Successful learners are successful students. Students learn outside the classroom in informal settings, such as the library. Zimmerman defines the nature of informal learning through his description of self-regulated or intentional learning that involves behavioral and environmental self-regulation. He describes a process of self-regulation of the environment whereby a student would "arrange their room by eliminating noise, arranging lighting and arranging a place to write."⁷ Beatty notes that students in the library approach their environment by choosing spaces that are likely to support their success.⁸ We ask, "What would a successful learning space look like for Indigenous students?"

Most academic libraries have not yet responded to Indigenousization in significantly meaningful ways. Andrews provides a personal narrative of how libraries and the academy still uphold colonialism. She reflects on her Maori identity in light of her graduate education in library and information science. Andrews contends that "despite their progress toward becoming safe and inclusive spaces, libraries and universities operate as sites that have contributed to the colonization and trauma of Indigenous communities, and have long served to assist Indigenous assimilation into majority culture."⁹ Some libraries have taken steps such as directional signs in Indigenous languages, collections including

contemporary Indigenous authors and researchers, decolonizing controlled vocabulary and indexing, or including an “Elder in Residence” program to illustrate respect for Indigenous knowledge and culture.

Andrews’s contentions are echoed in the work of The Canadian Federation of Library Associations who established The Truth and Reconciliation Committee.¹⁰ The committee noted that libraries need to decolonize and Indigenize their presence to welcome the Indigenous library user and validate their sovereignty.

Although the literature is peppered with suggestions on steps for Indigenizing libraries, such as the personal librarian program for first year Aboriginal students at University of Alberta,¹¹ there has been little attention specifically on Indigenous students’ lived experience of learning within academic library spaces. Recent studies have investigated Indigenous students’ experiences and perceptions of academic libraries. Neurohr and Bailey conducted a photo-elicitation study that explored the role of academic libraries in the lives of Native students. The results focused on the tangible, such as uncertainty about library services (using the collection, signage, and printers facilitating student work). However, the researchers did not investigate the students’ experiences of informal learning within the library spaces.¹²

Minthorn and Marsh’s study is of importance as it used a variety of arts-based inquiry methods including Photovoice, photo-elicitation, and visual narrative to explore Native American students’ experience of space and place at a US college. The researchers note that there were no previous studies that used visual-arts based methodologies for investigating Native students’ experiences of college spaces. Although the library was not the focus of the study, the students pointed out that they felt unwelcome there, as the main library includes a prominent painting of the conquistadors who conquered New Mexico.¹³ Young and Brownotter describe a case study that used participatory design with Native American students. Together, a librarian and Native American students co-created a community outreach tool for a university library. The project “created a space for Native American students to tell the story of their experiences at the university, to co-determine the design process, and to voice their concerns within the library.”¹⁴

Notably, these studies did not include the students as co-researchers but rather as subjects of investigation. Our project included the students as co-researchers. The Indigenous students were invited to take the lead in data gathering and data commentary. In order for this to happen we needed to create a safe place for the students to share their views, perspectives, experiences, and feelings. The success of our project depended on it. Thankfully, the students took up the offer and led the way for us.

III. Methodology

We are cognizant that we are non-Indigenous librarians and researchers who wanted to conduct research collaboratively **with** Indigenous students, not **on** the students. Therefore, we chose a research methodology that placed student voices at the center of the research, through a community-based participatory research (CBPR) framework. Castleden and Garvin provide an overview of CBPR, noting that it has the potential to contribute to the decolonization of the university researcher/Indigenous community relationship. They note that the goals of CBPR are shared power, trust, and ownership. We needed to recognize our power as academic librarians and educational specialists working with students, to attempt to “establish a power balance” to help foster trust between ourselves and the students, and ultimately to share power.¹⁵ Trust, a cornerstone of any relationship, is required. We hoped to establish trust through being open, honest, and engaged. We also strived for the students to engage as partners and leaders, not simply participants, in the research process.¹⁶ Through this sense of ownership of the research, students were encouraged to determine the trajectory of the research. The University of Calgary approved the ethics application.

Indigenous students' voices were heard through the use of Photovoice, which encompasses the tenets of CBPR. Photovoice involves asking participants to take photographs to document experiences or places, capturing their feelings, thoughts, ideas and reflections. These photographs are then shared, often in a group setting, with the photographer/participant explaining the meaning of the photo.¹⁷ The photographs do not stand alone as artifacts; rather, it is the dialogue surrounding the images that is of importance.¹⁸

Castleden and Garvin suggest Photovoice is an effective method for working with Indigenous populations as it helps in "sharing power, fostering trust, developing a sense of ownership, creating community change and building capacity."¹⁹ These are key elements that were required for our research with Indigenous students and their lived experiences of learning in informal library spaces. Julien et al. note that "due to the unique way Photovoice participants are involved in data gathering, analysis, and sometimes even the planning and dissemination phases of the study, they become researchers in their own right."²⁰ Thus, the Indigenous students in our study were co-researchers, not just participants, throughout the entire research process.

Research Purpose:

The purpose of our study was to explore and understand through Photovoice how Indigenous undergraduate students at the University of Calgary experience their learning in informal library spaces and elsewhere on campus.

Co-Researchers:

Potential participants were recruited through word-of-mouth and advertisement through the Writing Symbols Lodge, the Indigenous center at our University. The Director of the Writing Symbols reached out to specific students, circulated a recruitment poster, and posted on social media (see the poster in Appendix 1). Three female self-identified Indigenous students agreed to be involved. All were undergraduate students. Two were in their early twenties and the other was a mature student with grown children. Significantly, none of the students were familiar with library spaces on campus. Students were given point-and-shoot cameras to keep as well as provided with co-curricular credit to honor their time and commitment to the research project.

Pre-Study Interview:

Prior to commencing the Photovoice research, two researchers met with each student individually for a pre-study interview in January 2020. The purpose of the pre-study interview was to get to know the students, to understand the students as learners, and to discover what the students expected to learn from participating in the project. Consent forms were explained and students signed (informed consent) before the interview began. The interviews were audiotaped and transcribed verbatim.

Photovoice Workshops:

The development of our workshops was informed by Photovoice books and manuals including: Latz's *Photovoice research in education and beyond: A practical guide from theory to exhibition*,²¹ Palibroda's *A Practical Guide to Photovoice: Sharing Pictures, Telling Stories, and Changing Communities*,²² and Rutger's *Photovoice: Facilitator's Guide*.²³ Further, one researcher (Hayden) had completed Photovoice training in London, England with PhotoVoice.org

We used a D2L course (learning management system) for corresponding with the students and sharing updates. The students also uploaded their photos, along with recorded stories, to the D2L platform. This space was secure, provided more-than-adequate digital space for the photos, and all students were familiar with D2L.

Table III-1 provides details of the Photovoice workshops. After the initial Lunch and Meet gathering, each workshop was held in the late afternoon with dinner provided. They were each 2.5–3 hours in length.

Table III-1. Photovoice workshop details

Workshop	Date	Purpose / Details
Lunch and Meet	February 12, 2020	<p>Purpose: Informal lunch to get to know each other</p> <p>Activity: Students provided with point-and-shoot cameras</p> <p>Homework: Learn how to use the camera and reflect on <i>Who am I as a learner?</i></p>
Workshop #1	February 25, 2020	<p>Purpose: Build relationship with students; learn about Photovoice research</p> <p>Activity: PPT on ethics of photography, technical/composition basics</p> <p>Students shared and described their practice photos</p> <p>Discussed/signed <i>Guiding Principles</i> and <i>Data Sharing Protocols</i> documents.</p> <p>Ensured students knew they owned their photos and their stories</p> <p>Established Group norms. Developed group research question</p> <p>Homework: Students to take photos of spaces, places, and the library asking themselves: <i>Who am I as a learner?</i></p>
Workshop #2	March 10, 2020	<p>Purpose: Explore students’ photos and stories</p> <p>Activity: Reviewed research question and group norms “working in a good way”</p> <p>Introduced wellness support person</p> <p>Each student shared their photos and stories.</p> <p>Students engaged and shared their experiences when viewing another’s photos</p>
Workshop #3	March 17, 2020 Cancelled. University moved to remote	<p>Purpose: Continue exploring students’ photos and stories</p> <p>Review research question and group norms “working in a good way”</p> <p>Activity: Photos printed and students to sort through them, choosing ones that were most representative of <i>Who am I as a learner?</i></p> <p>What themes do the students see in the photos? What is missing?</p>

Workshop	Date	Purpose / Details
	delivery due to Covid-19.	As the University moved to remote learning, students were encouraged to upload their photos to D2L with recorded stories.

Workshop Outcomes

The workshops, outlined in Table 1, were designed to exemplify the CBPR principles. A program planning template was selected to engage all participants in activities, clarify the agenda, and identify goals. At all times, the Indigenous students had an opportunity for input into the planning of each workshop. We worked together and agreed on each aspect as we moved forward, recognizing time was required to get to know one another and develop trust.²⁴

Two significant outcomes of the workshops include our agreement on how to work together and the co-construction of a research question (Workshop #1). The Indigenous students identified respect as paramount to creating a safe space to work together. The planned activity included a brainstorming exercise to openly explore how we would proceed in the study as a group. Each student wrote on a white board, added and revised words, and when they were satisfied with the outcome, we agreed how we would “work together in a good way” (Figure III-1). The principles identified were Accountability, Confidentiality, Speak one at a time, Flexibility, Tasks (who does what), Participate, Share and Trust, Authenticity, and Engagement. These principles sustained and guided us in the process.

Figure III-1. Working together in a good way. Design by Nancy Nelson, 2020, used with permission



Before participant recruitment, we started our research with the question, *As an Indigenous student, who am I as a learner?* To ensure the Indigenous students were co-researchers, we included an activity to invite the students to generate a research question that was meaningful to them. As a result, the research question became *“How can ethical spaces be created to enhance learning in a good way for Indigenous learners at University of Calgary?”*

In Workshop #2, we reviewed our co-constructed agreements and the research question. With full agreement, we made plans to continue with Workshop #3, which was abruptly canceled due to the global pandemic Covid-19.

After the University moved to remote learning, we stepped back from the research to provide students with the time and space to concentrate on online learning. We followed up with the students in spring and then fall to see if they would like to continue with the research in a virtual environment. All three students decided to leave the study, despite how engaged and passionate they were. Many life complexities arose that were of importance, and we understood the students’ decision.

IV. Preliminary Findings

Students told their unique stories through their photos, and shared their reported common experiences of not belonging, seeking supportive learning spaces (comfort, light, and nature), and their values of relationships, learning, and community, and wanting to be culturally represented in their surroundings.

While we have not been able to complete the study as planned due to Covid-19 interruptions, we were able to collect preliminary data from the Indigenous students. Each of the three students told a personal story through her photos. While each story was individual, there were common threads throughout. They told of not feeling at home on campus, of feeling that they do not belong because they would see little that represented them and their culture. They spoke of their values, of relationships, and learning and bringing what they have learned to their community. Their desire to learn and grow and make a difference was strong. Through their photographs and words, three themes emerged: (1) nature, (2) representation, and (3) acknowledgement. Examples of these themes are presented with the Indigenous students' photos and voices.

Theme 1. Nature

“Can we see ourselves in this space? The [mountains] allow us to flourish within their space. The university can do that for us. They [the University] can allow us to flourish within that space and provide us the opportunity to do so, and the space to do so.” Indigenous student, University of Calgary

Figure IV-1. Nature—Rocky Mountains, west of the university. Indigenous student photo.



Nature is a strongly represented as a theme in the students' stories. In this image (Figure IV-I, the student asks, *“can we see ourselves in this space?”* She compares the mountains to the university, where the mountains allow people to flourish in the same way that the university's purpose is to provide space for the student to flourish. The students are connected to nature and in the same way wish to be connected to the university. Nature anchors the students; nature reflects their culture and connects them to their community.

Theme 2. Representation

“To me when I see blank walls, I see an opportunity to use up that space and make it purposeful. When I think about more inclusive space for Indigenizing space, it's not only about nature, but it's about representation and where we can feel that space is comfortable and homey.” Indigenous student, University of Calgary

Figure IV-2. Blank space in the TFDL. Indigenous student photo.



Indigenous students want to feel that they are represented in the space. Through representation, students can become comfortable, and begin to feel that they belong. There are simple ways to represent the Indigenous student in the library. Blank walls are opportunities to work collaboratively with Indigenous students to develop areas for deeper and meaningful representation.

We can help make the students feel represented when they see themselves in their spaces. Most importantly, the students themselves should direct what should be in those spaces.

Theme 3. Acknowledgement

“First, I want to look around and see where I’m acknowledged in the first place before I begin to decolonize library space, right? And I saw this. It [the sign] just said, in your way ‘carving on whale bones’ but I didn’t like seeing it because it’s ‘Oh this was from my people,’ I’m not Inuit, but. . . And then I just felt acknowledged and, we have space here, we’re here already.” Indigenous student, University of Calgary

Figure IV-3. Inuit art on display in the TFDL. Indigenous student photo.



Indigenous students want to be acknowledged in university spaces. They want to be part of the university community and to see themselves acknowledged in their surroundings and learning spaces. Working together “in a good way,” using their words, not our colonial words, is a step towards acknowledgement. Inviting Indigenous students to select meaningful artifacts for intentional and thoughtful display is one method to acknowledge their space.

V. Next Steps

The next iteration of our study continues to be an exploration of how Indigenous undergraduate students at the University of Calgary experience their informal learning and library spaces. We are still focused on working with Indigenous undergraduate students “in a good way.” We will move forward with our research using Photo elicitation as a complementary method. Photovoice and Photo elicitation are quite similar as both use photographs for gathering data. In Photovoice, participants take photos, and share their stories related to these photos in workshops/group settings. Photo elicitation is conducted one-on-one between the facilitator(s) and participant. Pre-selected photos are provided, and the participant shares their reactions and feelings about the photo. Minthorn and Marsh conducted a study that included both Photovoice and Photo elicitation to discover how Indigenous college students viewed their experiences in relation to space.²⁵

Our revised study, then, incorporates Photo elicitation as complementary method. We will recruit new Indigenous student participants and will utilize researcher-generated photos of our library spaces to explore the students’ experiences of specific Taylor Family Digital Library spaces. We will have an open-ended dialogue focusing on the student’s perception and thoughts of their learning in relation to what they see in the photos. The purpose of the Photo elicitation session is to have students construct a narrative related to their learning and specific library spaces. The stories from the Photovoice workshops will be woven together with the Photo elicitation interviews to create a rich description of Indigenous students’ experiences with learning in library spaces.

VI. Conclusion. Time to start the conversation with Indigenous students

“We’re all on the same path towards the same destination of knowledge, learning, and being inclusive and respectful. We can either walk by each other and say, ‘Hey,’ or we can stop and have the conversation.” Indigenous student, University of Calgary

We have had the opportunity through this research project to start the conversation and to learn from Indigenous students what they value and how they perceive the colonial spaces in the University. Students have told us their learning is enhanced through nature, and through being intentionally represented and acknowledged within the university. We need to listen to them. We will learn how the spaces and inclusive practices can support all learners. The slogan “nothing about us, without us”²⁶ can be applied to this project and to the development of any student spaces. Indigenous students in this research have said “let’s stop,” acknowledge each other, have a discussion, and collaborate and find better ways to Indigenize these learning spaces here on campus.

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Susan Beatty is a librarian at the Taylor Family Digital Library, University of Calgary. Her research is on the relationship between student learning behaviours and learning space design. Susan has presented on various aspects of library leadership in learning.

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K. Alix Hayden is a senior research librarian and works with the faculties of nursing and kinesiology at the University of Calgary. Her doctoral work explored the lived experiences of students seeking information. Her current research delves deeper into understanding the lived experiences of Indigenous students’ learning in informal spaces, and how librarians can best support this learning.

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Cheryl Jeffs is an educational developer at the Taylor Institute, University of Calgary. Cheryl has collaborated with librarians on several Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) projects to help better understand and enhance student learning.

Endnotes

¹Brown, “Creating culturally safe learning spaces and Indigenizing higher education”; Ragoonaden, “Culturally Responsive Pedagogy.”

- ² Beatty, “Students’ Perception of Informal Learning Spaces in an Academic Library; An Investigation into the Relationship between Learning Behaviours and Space Design,” 1.
- ³ Beatty, “Students’ Perception of Informal Learning Spaces in an Academic Library; An Investigation into the Relationship between Learning Behaviours and Space Design,” 7.
- ⁴ University of Calgary, *Indigenous Strategy*, ii’taa’poh’to,’ 3.
- ⁵ University of Calgary, *Indigenous Strategy*, ii’taa’poh’to,’ 23.
- ⁶ Brook, “The Power of Indigenous Placemaking,” 28.
- ⁷ Zimmerman, “A Social Cognitive View of Self-Regulated Academic Learning,” 330.
- ⁸ Beatty, “Students’ Perception of Informal Learning Spaces in an Academic Library; An Investigation into the Relationship between Learning Behaviours and Space Design,” 1.
- ⁹ Andrews, “Reflections On Resistance, Decolonization, and the Historical Trauma of Libraries and Academia,” 184.
- ¹⁰ Callison, *Truth and Reconciliation Report and Recommendations*.
- ¹¹ Farnell, “Rethinking representation: Indigenous Peoples and Contexts at the University of Alberta Libraries.”
- ¹² Neurohr, “Using photo-elicitation with Native American Students to Explore Perceptions of the Physical Library.”
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- ¹⁴ Young, “Toward a More Just Library: Participatory Design with Native American Students,” 7-8.
- ¹⁵ Castleden, “Modifying Photovoice for Community-Based Participatory Indigenous Research,” 1395.
- ¹⁶ Cullinane, “Evaluating Community-based Research: Hearing the Views of Student Research Partners.”
- ¹⁷ Wang, “Youth Participation in Photovoice as a Strategy for Community Change.”
- ¹⁸ Wang, “Photovoice: concept, methodology, and use for participatory needs assessment.”
- ¹⁹ Castledon, “Modifying Photovoice for Community-Based Participatory Indigenous Research,” 1401.
- ²⁰ Julien, “Photovoice: a Promising Method for Studies of Individuals’ Information Practices,” 259.
- ²¹ Latz, “*Photovoice Research in Education and beyond: a Practical Guide from Theory to Exhibition.*”
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- ²⁴ Bartleet, “Reconciliation and Transformation through Mutual Learning: Outlining a Framework for Arts-Based Service Learning with Indigenous Communities in Australia.”
- ²⁵ Minthorn, “Centering Indigenous College Student Voices and Perspectives through Photovoice and Photo-elicitation.”
- ²⁶ Bridges, “‘Nothing About Us Without Us:’ The Ethics of Outsider Research.”

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Appendix 1: Recruitment Poster

UNIVERSITY OF CALGARY

Where Do You Learn Best on Campus?

Seeking Undergraduate Canadian Self-Identified Indigenous Students

**PHASE 1: Fall 2019 – Winter 2020
Study Participation Involves:**

- Pre-study interview (1 hour)
- Taking photos of informal learning spaces in the Library and on campus (3 hours)
- Talking about your photos with other students in 5 workshops (15 hours)
- Post-study interview (1 hour)
- Approximately 20 hours commitment

**PHASE 2: Fall 2020 – Winter 2021
Optional Participation Involves:**

- Assist in designing and writing an ebook as a co-author based on the 2019-20 workshops
- Assist in curating a photo exhibition
- Approximately 20 hours commitment

Participation Benefits

Phase 1:

- Receive co-curricular credit for participation
- Influence design of informal learning spaces in the library
- Learn about research process
- Keep digital point & shoot camera

Phase 2:

- Receive co-curricular credit for participation
- Co-authorship of an ebook
- Gain experience curating a photo exhibition
- Present at a local academic teaching and learning conference

If you are interested in participating, please contact:
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This study has been approved by the University of Calgary Conjoint Faculties Research Ethics Board ID#REB19-0601