‘If it weren’t for YouTube, I wouldn’t be here’
Exploring Indigenous Perspectives on Online Learning

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Abstract

In this study, I explored the voices of Indigenous students and teachers, who, despite the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action (2015), continue to be underrepresented in online learning at post-secondary institutions in Canada. This dissertation draws upon the narrative inquiry methodology to explore accounts of lived experiences through in-depth interviews and Sharing Circles. Data analysis included contextualisation and an inductive thematic analysis, which yielded seven themes: 1. Widening participation, 2. Building capacity, 3. Digital inequity, 4. Text-based dominance, 5. Impersonal environment, 6. Role and impact of peers, 7. Teacher presence. Overall, findings reveal that despite the potential and benefits of online learning for Indigenous students, barriers persist. Efforts must be increased to design and teach online courses in decolonizing ways. Nine tentative design recommendations are proposed.

**Keywords:** Indigenous, online learning, online teaching, post-secondary education, Canada, Five R’s, culturally relevant pedagogy
Declaration

Having reviewed the program handbook and course-specific guidance on good academic practice and reflected on the nature of plagiarism and the ethical representation of academic knowledge, I confirm that this work is submitted without any misappropriation of sources.
Acknowledgments

I gratefully acknowledge the seven participants in this inquiry. Without your willingness to entrust me with your stories, this project would not have come into existence. Marsee – Hiy Hiy – Thank you! I remain eternally grateful.

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Abbreviations and Usage

**FNMIo** – First Nations, Métis, Inuit, Other Indigenous. This abbreviation is used in reference to the research participants in this inquiry; otherwise the term ‘Indigenous’ is used, sometimes interchangeably with ‘Aboriginal’, depending on a reference cited.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Online learning is increasing at post-secondary institutions in Canada (Johnson et al., 2019). Such growth often leads to the marginalization of Indigenous worldviews as institutions attempt to make learning relatable to diverse audiences (Restoule, 2018; McLoughlin and Olivier, 2000). Since the dominant worldview and pedagogy represented in online learning tends to be a Euro-Western one (Adam, 2019; Restoule, 2018; Dumbrill and Green, 2008), the voices of First Nations, Métis, Inuit, and Other Indigenous (FNMIO) students in Canada continue to be underrepresented. The FNMIO students who enroll in online post-secondary education are forced to adapt and adjust their way of thinking to successfully navigate the Western post-secondary institution (Absolon, 2011; Pidgeon, 2008; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991).

In Canada, the relationship between the Indigenous populations and the dominant post-secondary education system is further complicated by the ongoing and intergenerational impacts of colonialism (Battiste, 2013; Wolfe, 2006). However, Indigenous peoples are no longer invisible in Canadian society. Between 2006 and 2016 ‘the Aboriginal population has grown by 42.5%, more than four times the growth rate of the non-Aboriginal population over the same period’ (Statistics Canada, 2017). Educational institutions therefore need to address the needs of current FNMIO students and future generations. In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC)¹ called on Canada to improve post-secondary educational opportunities for FNMIO students. It should follow, then, that in 2020 student enrollment should have increased and conversations around creating online courses should have focussed on ways to incorporate Indigenous perspectives and create culturally safe learning environments, so that Indigenous students would feel respected and recognized. Unfortunately, FNMIO students continue to be underrepresented at Canadian post-secondary institutions (Statistics Canada, 2017; Pidgeon, 2008; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991) and are less likely to graduate than their non-FNMIO counterparts (Statistics Canada, 2017). For example, in 2019 only 8.6% of matriculations at the University of Manitoba constituted Indigenous students (University of Manitoba, 2020).

¹ Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) – a process to uncover the truth behind the residential school system in Canada, which had children separated from Indigenous parents and placed in schools run by Christian churches. More information available at Moran (2015)
Considering the growing Indigenous population and the critical time in Canadian history to create equitable educational opportunities for the FNMIO students (TRC, 2015), it is imperative that the post-secondary online teaching and learning design efforts respond. Teachers and learning designers should be actively seeking ways to incorporate Indigenous perspectives. Underpinned by my belief that online learning at post-secondary institutions in Canada must be respectful of and relevant to FNMIO students’ values and educational needs, and in keeping with Selwyn et al. (2020), Bates (2019), Tunstall (2019), Cote-Meek (2017), and Selwyn (2010), this dissertation amplifies the voices of seven FNMIO participants and explores their stories of lived experience in taking and/or teaching online courses at various Canadian post-secondary institutions.

**My Positionality**

I explicate my positionality to demonstrate my respect for one of the protocols of an Indigenous research methodology (Kovach, 2009; Absolon and Willet, 2005), aspects of which inform this inquiry. An autobiographical reflection is also where narrative inquiry begins (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). My positionality provides contextual insights into my origins and intentions.

_Nazywam się Iwona Gniadek i jestem z Polski. Mieszkam na ziemiach Traktatu nr. 1, na terytorium obecnej Kanady, od 2007 roku._ I am from Poland. I currently live on Treaty 1 territory, which is the ancestral lands of the Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene peoples; this territory is also the homeland of the Métis Nation. The city of Winnipeg, in the province of Manitoba, was established on this territory and in 2007, became my home. I identify as a re-settler.

Having completed graduate studies in Applied Linguistics, I became an English as an Additional Language (EAL) teacher. I taught adult EAL learners in Poland, the UK, and Canada, in face-to-face, blended, and online modalities. Working with adult language learners from various cultural backgrounds taught me flexibility in pedagogical approaches and openness to diverse perspectives, which I continue to espouse, both as a learning designer in the post-secondary context in Canada and as a researcher in this inquiry.

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2 For a map of Treaties in what is now Manitoba, visit [First Nations and Treaty Areas in Manitoba](#).

3 A re-settler is an immigrant in what is now Canada (LaRocque, 2010). According to LaRocque, the Indigenous peoples were the original settlers in North America.
As a learner and teacher, I have been an avid user and promoter of the many benefits of online technology. When I joined a post-secondary institution as a learning designer in 2016, I sought ways to creatively incorporate online technologies to address various curricular and student needs. Concurrently, in response to the TRC’s Calls to Action (2015), my institution’s mission was revised to incorporate Indigenous perspectives and create pathways for FNMIO students’ achievement. Although Indigenous knowledges and perspectives were added to the program planning processes, few people knew how to do it. In addition, student data to determine Indigenous student needs was unavailable. I consulted with Indigenous colleagues and embarked on a formal self-educational research inquiry, to learn from FNMIO students directly.

As a re-settler on Treaty 1 land, I commit to challenging the current Euro-Western educational practices at post-secondary institutions in Canada and support the decolonization of online learning for FNMIO and non-FNMIO students. This inquiry reflects this commitment.

The Research Question, Design, and Methods

The purpose of this inquiry was to examine FNMIO students’ and teachers’ stories of their online learning or teaching experiences at post-secondary institutions in Canada. Specifically, this inquiry sought to answer the following question:

What stories do Indigenous students and teachers tell about their online learning and teaching experience at Canadian post-secondary institutions?

This inquiry was guided by the following objectives:

1. Identify the opportunities driving online learning and the challenges to the successful delivery of online learning for FNMIO populations within a post-secondary context in Canada.
2. Critically review existing research in relation to this inquiry.
3. Witness FNMIO students’ and teachers’ views and stories of their online learning experience.

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4 Truth and Reconciliation Commission: Calls to Action is a set of 94 calls to action to the Canadian government and society to ‘redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of reconciliation’ (2015, p. 1) [http://www.trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf](http://www.trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf)
4. Articulate design recommendations for ways to incorporate FNMIO perspectives and pedagogies in designing and teaching online learning programs within a post-secondary context in Canada.

Taking a relational perspective (Wilson, 2008) and applying a narrative inquiry approach (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000), FNMIO participants’ stories of online learning and teaching were collected through three in-depth open-ended semi-structured interviews between August 2019 and April 2020, and analysed using contextualization and an inductive thematic analysis.

The corpus of findings, with all its subjective dimensions, combined with the results from the literature review, provided a deeper understanding of the online learning experience and perspectives of the FNMIO participants.

The Conceptual Foundations

I first discuss the opportunities and challenges online learning presents in Indigenous contexts, to better understand the context in which FNMIO students and teachers learn and teach. I then discuss whether online learning can be a culturally relevant environment for FNMIO populations. Next, teacher presence and an online learning community are examined, considering examples of online courses delivered in various Indigenous contexts.

The conceptual framework emerged from the data findings, to allow the lived experiences of the seven participants to guide this inquiry, because my aim was to listen and learn, without pre-determined parameters.

This inquiry is underpinned by the Five R’s principles of respect, relevancy, responsibility, reciprocity, and relationships (Tessaro et al., 2019; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991), which serve to foster Indigenous ways of knowing in online learning. Originally, Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) purported four culturally sensitive principles. Grown primarily out of the urgency to increase matriculation and attainment of FNMIO students at post-secondary institutions, the Four R’s of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility represent critical concepts to guide researchers (e.g., Hunt and Oyarzun, 2020; Davey, 2019; Restoule, 2018), institutions, and educators (e.g., Root et al., 2019; Tessaro et al., 2019) in creating meaningful learning environments for FNMIO students. Respect encompasses an inclusion of Indigenous worldviews in the curriculum. Relevance relates to learning that addresses the unique needs of Indigenous students, including learning from place and each other, not solely from textbooks. Reciprocity reflects learning that reduces the power distance
between the teacher and the learner by placing the learner in the teacher’s role, and by having an impact in the real world. **Responsibility** puts on us on teachers and FNMIO students to protect Indigenous cultural integrity. Restoule (2008, cited in Tessaro *et al.*, 2019) added the fifth principle of **relationships**, asserting that it underpins the other four principles. The rationality is that without establishing and maintaining strong relationships, the other four principles may not be fully accomplished.

**Limitations**

This inquiry was conducted with FNMIO participants who took or taught online courses in the post-secondary context in Canada. The seven participants represented various Indigenous backgrounds, namely Manitoba Cree, Métis, Inuit Canadian, and U.S.-Blackfoot. I aimed to emphasize their individual voices as well as augment their collective voice within the online learning realm. Aside from their heterogenous backgrounds, participants shared their online learning experiences from various post-secondary institutions across Canada. Therefore, the results may not be generalizable to other contexts or relevant to all FNMIO students. Transferability of the findings is underpinned by **relational accountability** (Wilson, 2008); given the description of the inquiry context, participant portraits, and findings, research users are invited to ascertain its applicability to other settings (Trochim, 2020).

Another limitation is my position as an outsider to the Indigenous cultures. As a re-settler in Canada, I am an outsider to both the Canadian and the Indigenous cultures, which limits my ability to interpret participants’ accounts of their online learning experiences. Therefore, research participants were invited to verify the individual portraits, themes, and findings, to ascertain the validity of this inquiry outcome.

**Value of This Inquiry**

Within the post-secondary context in what is Canada now, this inquiry responds to the TRC (2015) incrementally by foregrounding and amplifying the voices of the underrepresented FNMIO students and teachers in online learning. The results are intended to benefit online students, teachers, learning designers, Indigenous communities, and post-secondary institutions. Post-secondary institutions may use the recommendations to inform policy and course design practices in response to the TRC. Online teachers may benefit from considerations for culturally respectful teaching practices being implemented. FNMIO students at post-secondary institutions would then benefit from improved relevance for their online learning experience. Indigenous communities might use the recommendations
to build their own online programs and retain FNMI students in their own communities. The output of this inquiry may help those with an interest in ensuring that the FNMI audience needs are rightfully recognized and prioritized in their pursuit for decolonizing digital education.

Dissertation Structure

Chapter 1 provides an overview of this inquiry; specifically, my positionality as a researcher, the context and significance of the study, the design methodology and research question, as well as limitations. Chapter 2 examines the existing literature pertaining to online learning for Indigenous populations in Canada. Chapter 3 explains the methodology of the study, ethical considerations, research strategies, and data analysis. Chapter 4 discusses the findings generated from the data analysis. Chapter 5 provides a summary of the findings, implications, recommendations, and suggestions for future research.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

This chapter explores the relevant literature. The preliminary review of the literature preceded data analysis and identified limited research focusing on FNMIO populations in cohort-based online courses at post-secondary institutions. Existing research focused on blended learning approaches designed for specific Indigenous contexts. A secondary review of the literature undertaken during data analysis allowed me to refocus the review around the ideas generated in this inquiry (Giles, King, and de Lacey, 2013).

Flexible Online Learning

Defined as ‘a form of distance education where the primary delivery mechanism is via the Internet’ (Johnson et al., 2019, p. 4), online learning is growing at Canadian post-secondary institutions (ibid.). FNMIO students who may be residing in urban or remote locations across Canada therefore gain opportunities to matriculate and attain post-secondary credentials from where they live or work (Tessaro et al., 2019; McAuley and Walton, 2011). Such locational flexibility of online learning could be paramount to individual and collective well-being and advancement of FNMIO communities. Obtaining a degree may help with social mobility and ‘improve life for their people, in the context of their struggles for self-determination and tribal sovereignty over land’ (Spronk and Radtke 1988, p. 224). One stark example is epitomized by the Nunavut Master of Education program, developed as blended to decolonize Inuit education, offering face-to-face courses during the summer months and online courses during the winter months. The blended design alleviated Inuit students from the need to leave families dispersed across the Nunavut territory as well as its communities, during arctic winter conditions. The Inuit students enrolled in these courses were able to learn anytime anywhere (McAuley and Walton, 2011).

Despite the perception that online learning enables anytime anyplace learning and teaching (Naidu, 2017), online learning within Indigenous contexts in Canada is afflicted with paradoxes. Despite widening participation of dispersed FNMIO students, as evidenced by McAuley and Walton (2011), accessibility to online learning across Canada depends on internet availability, which continues to be inconsistent, highlighting a digital divide (CRTC, 2019; Statistics Canada, 2017). It is common to drive one hour north of Winnipeg and lose cellular phone reception or internet connection. One might conclude that by enabling students to learn where they live, online learning helps communities retain members, thus supporting decolonization of education, in contrast to former education strategies that
demanded displacement, as in the residential schools (Wolfe, 2006). However, how can education arising from a post-secondary institution be decolonized if, by its nature, it represents a colonial system with grades, timed semesters, and locked-in online learning environments, away from community (Tessaro et al., 2019; Fraser and Voyageur, 2016)? Online technologies and learning are posited to contribute to the growth of capacity of Indigenous communities, reunion, and revival of Indigenous voices and traditions (Wemigwans, 2018; LaPensée and Lewis, 2014; Sioui, 2007). However, because of the diverse audiences targeted by post-secondary institutions in their development of online programs, online learning tends to be universalized so that the concepts are relatable to diverse learners (Restoule, 2018; McLoughlin and Oliver, 2000). Despite great potentials of online learning for FNMIO populations, many social, economic, and cultural barriers persist which preclude them from equitable participation in online learning. Navigating the online learning terrain and balancing the potentials and barriers for FNMIO populations appears to be a nuanced and channeling task for students, educators, communities, and post-secondary institutions, despite the affordances of locational and temporal flexibility.

Culturally Relevant Online Learning

A common theme across the literature is the integration of Indigenous perspectives and pedagogies in online learning (Hunt and Oyarzun, 2020; Restoule, 2018; Brant, 2013). In a study by Hunt and Oyarzun (2020), FNMIO students desired an Indigenous-focused curriculum so they could learn more about their cultural identity. When Indigenous perspectives are not included, online courses risk perpetuating cognitive imperialism (Battiste, 2013), which denotes the pervasiveness of the Western mindset at post-secondary institutions. For a course to be culturally relevant, both teachers and students should contribute learning material authored by Indigenous scholars (Brant, 2013). However, an inclusion of Indigenous perspectives is not a simple task for non-Indigenous teachers, who may lack cultural awareness and community connections to present it in a meaningful way and avoid tokenism (Smith et al., 2018). In addition to the non-Indigenous teachers’ concerns, Indigenous teachers may question teaching Indigenous knowledges online (Restoule, 2018). This desire for cultural relevance implies the involvement of institutions to create professional development opportunities, establish funded research, and introduce networking spaces where faculty can connect with Indigenous colleagues and collaborate on ways to Indigenize online courses (Pete, 2016). Next, I will consider two
examples of online courses that delivered Indigenous teachings online to large and diverse audiences.

The feasibility of incorporating and teaching Indigenous topics online was explored by Restoule (2018). Underpinned by the Five R’s principles (Restoule, 2008, cited in Tessaro et al., 2019; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991), the course developed by Restoule was available to global audiences, bringing together individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds and levels of familiarity with Indigenous perspectives. Drawing on high-context communication constructs (in small classes, where teachers and students know each other well) versus low-context ones (where no assumptions can be made about the other interlocutor’s understanding of the context) (Hall, 1990), Restoule argued that only introductory Indigenous topics, where no pre-requisite knowledge was required, could be taught online. The course entailed videos, readings, discussions, quizzes, and supplemental resources curated from the internet. Through an analysis of student surveys, Restoule found that bringing Indigenous education online is possible but not straightforward, and emphasized several critical components to Indigenize online courses. These components included a) promoting community building, b) incorporating experiential learning, c) ‘finding ways to bring participants to connect with place and community’ (Restoule, 2018, p. 20), and d) inviting students to become teachers by sharing their stories and experience. These design recommendations reflect the Five R’s principles (Restoule, 2018; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991). Because the course did not represent a specific Indigenous context, the students were expected to bring theirs. Restoule concluded that fostering a community in a large online course decolonizes education and eliminates divisions, but voiced a concern over the necessity to build the course prior to its commencement, because it reduced and restricted responsive teaching. Restoule (2018) also stated that online environments may be limiting when it comes to teaching Indigenous topics, but asserted that face-to-face teaching is not free from limitations, and teachers should seek out creative ways to manage both environments to accomplish their teaching goals. As demonstrated in Restoule’s course, this can be achieved through thoughtful and decolonizing design practice.

Unlike Restoule’s course (2018), the Root et al.’s course was located ‘where the story was told’ (2019, p. 12). This meant that students were not expected to contextualize the knowledge themselves; the context was transmitted through the learning materials, location, teachers, and traditional ceremonies streamed online. Such localization was the goal of the course created in response to the TRC (2015). It was a hybrid course, and
students were able to participate online, face-to-face, or through a combination of modalities, including communicating via social media. An important pedagogical aspect was dialogic learning. Students engaged with materials and each other using various technologies, and through reflective writing. Similar to Restoule (2019), this course was available to global audiences, thus expanding its impact beyond its specific geographical location. While both courses were constrained by institutional expectations of graded assessment, schedule, and technology, they achieved transformative learning outcomes (Taylor and Cranton, 2012), as evidenced by their findings. Restoule (2018) reported on students reconnecting with their roots as a result of taking his course. Likewise, Root et al. (2019) observed a paradigm change in the way students responded to learning.

The two courses were both offered to large, diverse audiences, and incorporated many of the same pedagogies, such as lectures, readings, discussions. They were different in their approaches to cultural relevance. Restoule’s course (2018) involved students connecting learning to their contexts and sharing back as a reciprocal co-teaching strategy. In this approach, each student became a connector between the diverse online community and the community they were physically immersed in; the places merged through the student. Root et al.’s course (2019) was localized, focused on a specific nation and their worldviews and values. Both courses demonstrated that delivering a culturally relevant online education is possible if courses are designed and taught in culturally respectful and relevant ways. Educators should explore the potentials of integrating Indigenous knowledges in their courses, but do so in collaboration with local Indigenous communities.

Teacher Presence

Research over three decades confirms that relationships with teachers are essential to FNMIO students’ online learning experience and success (Hunt and Oyarzun, 2020; Davey, 2019; Cochrane and Maposa, 2018; Restoule, 2018; Simon et al., 2014; Brant, 2013; Russell et al., 2007; Spronk and Radtke, 1988). The study by Spronk and Radtke assessed distance programming offered to First Nations women in remote locations and found ‘cultural values place great importance on the quality of one-to-one personal interaction’ (p. 218). Without personal interactions with the teachers, students were reluctant to ask questions during phone tutorials, resulting in courses being modified to incorporate on-site tutorials. Spronk and Radtke’s point was reiterated by Russell et al. (2007), who reported that lack of personal communication negatively impacted students’ attitudes towards teachers and engagement.
with course materials. While Davey’s (2019) study found that FNMIO students prioritized teacher-student relationships over relationships with peers, Hunt and Oyarzun (2020)’s findings revealed that FNMIO students desired more interactions with both teachers and peers. This theme in the literature underscores the importance of a strong personal connection between teachers and students in online courses.

Strategies for establishing such connections and building relationship with students require teachers to invest themselves in online courses. First, this should include flattening of the hierarchy between teachers and students (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991), increasing online communications (Russell et al., 2007), and exhibiting cultural sensitivity (Simon et al., 2014; Spronk and Radtke, 1988). Interactions and relationships should reflect an exchange of knowledge and experience, where teachers ‘engage themselves and their students in a process of sense-making’ (Barnhardt, 1986, cited in Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991, p. 11). Restoule (2018) stated that such a reciprocal student-teacher relationship was achieved using the discussion forum. Second, through increased engagement in two-way teaching, teachers and students can develop a better mutual understanding, an observation purported by Russell et al. (2007). Prompt responses to student inquiries, incorporating humour and storytelling, and learning about students’ cultures can serve as strategies to increase students’ respect for teachers, and students’ accountability for their learning (Russell et al., 2007). Finally, since FNMIO learners may juggle family and community obligations, teachers should exhibit sensitivity and flexibility in addressing their need to balance needs (Smith et al., 2018; Simon et al., 2014; Spronk and Radtke, 1988). Building relationships may take time and effort, but it yields benefits, for both students and teachers, of mutual understanding, reciprocity, respect, and accountability. The suggested strategies are interpersonal and reflective of the human dimension of teaching online.

Connectedness can be established via multimedia. Use of personalized multimedia, such as video lectures and podcasts aligns with Indigenous traditions of orality in imparting knowledges (Castellano, 2000; Archibald, 1990, cited in Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991, p. 8). Multimedia research shows that connectedness between teachers and students in online learning can be enhanced through video and audio (Steele et al., 2018; Glazier, 2016; Kizilcec et al., 2015). Kizilcec et al. determined that videos with a teacher’s face had a positive impact on social presence, and increased student satisfaction and retention. Likewise, Glazier (2016) determined that posting a teacher’s welcome video and weekly video announcements positively impacted satisfaction and retention. By implementing
these strategies, Glazier projected a humanized presence online and demonstrated caring about the students’ success. In a study on the value of personalized audio lectures, Steele et al. (2018) argued that meaningful connections between students and teachers are a prerequisite to students’ engagement in online learning. Similar to the impact of video, authors concluded that teacher-generated audio content enhanced connection. Neither video nor audio may have a direct impact on the achievement of the course outcomes (Steele et al., 2018; Kizilcec et al., 2015), but they may improve the learning experience, engagement, sense of belonging, and agency, and create the perception that the teacher genuinely cares for the students and is part of the virtual community. Teachers should not assume that either video or audio would be the solution to enhancing their presence and rapport with FNMI students in online courses, but should rather prioritize establishing personal connections.

**Online Learning Community**

Community in online learning needs to be established and relationships nurtured, to respect Indigenous teaching and learning traditions (Restoule, 2018). Belonging is a need and a relational principle in Indigenous worldviews (Blackstock, 2011). Traditional communities live together in a shared time and geographical location (Castellano, 2000). Cajete (1994) explains the construct of community as ‘the natural context of human life and activity’ (p. 167) in which ‘we are all related’ (p. 165).

Tessaro et al. (2019) reported on the creation, teaching, and student experiences of a First Nations’ Schools Principals Course. The course was underpinned by the Five R’s (Restoule 2018; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991) to alleviate the lacuna between the low-context online learning and the high-context of Indigenous teaching and learning (Tessaro et al., 2019; Hall, 1990). The results showed that despite professional loneliness experienced by the students in their dispersed geographical locations, the course helped build a close network. Authors observed that ‘relationship building between the participants was one of its [the course] greatest successes’ (p. 140). The success was attributed to the attention paid to the Five R’s while designing and delivering the course. Students connected outside the course and maintained ongoing connections afterwards. One design element that contributed to the community formation was a face-to-face meeting prior to the course launch. While this design feature may not be available to online instructors at post-secondary institutions, the
results from the study impart many significant lessons, especially the impact of the Five R’s application in fostering community.

Yet, FNMIO students’ experiences and appreciation of the online learning community vary. While some students felt isolated online due to geographical distances, others appreciated opportunities to learn with others (Simon et al., 2014; McAuley and Walton, 2011). Simon et al. (2014) found that even though students were able to access synchronous classes on personal computers, they achieved a greater sense of community when they met in person and viewed the class together. The connectedness established in that shared space fostered instantaneous reciprocal supports (Simon et al., 2014). Similarly, McAuley and Walton (2011) reported that students who felt lonely and disconnected in online courses used Skype eagerly as it showed who was online and enabled them to strike up immediate conversations. Thus, those students had a strong preference for face-to-face and real-time events, suggesting that such events strengthen the sense of the online learning community and connectedness.

Nevertheless, asynchronous communication tools appear to also strengthen the sense of community. In the McAuley and Walton (2011) study, while some students felt disconnected, others referred to an online forum as ‘a lifeline’ (p. 29). These students enjoyed engaging with others across distances and ‘learning new ways to feel part of a community’ (p. 29). What is striking about the students’ experiences in this study is the diverging perceptions of the technology and how it supported community building. This implies a need to incorporate pedagogical flexibility in online courses, to foster students’ engagement.

Furthermore, asynchronous community engagement may lead to transformative learning experiences (Brant, 2013; Taylor and Cranton, 2012). Brant’s personal account contended that online learning can be a ‘culturally safe space’ (p. 78) for FNMIO students, due to the temporal and physical flexibility afforded by the asynchronous discussion forum. Having time and space to prepare discussion contributions alleviated Brant’s anxiety of discussing Indigenous topics with non-Indigenous peers and resulted in a ‘pivotal time in [her] development as a scholar’ (p. 78). In her case, a strong and respectful learning community empowered her as an individual.

The reviewed literature suggests several community-building strategies and activities. First, a netiquette of respectful behaviours should be provided or developed in collaboration
with students to increase accountability (Restoule, 2018; Phirangee, 2016; Brant, 2013). Second, incorporating real-time gatherings enhances community building as students and teachers are no longer strangers (Tessaro et al., 2019; Brant, 2013). Third, teacher presence is critical to respectful and engaging community formation (Restoule, 2018; Phirangee, 2017; Phirangee, 2016; Brant, 2013). Fourth, digital storytelling and opportunities to share identity and locate oneself should be promoted at the beginning of online courses so that students and teachers can develop familiarity with each other; teachers should lead the way with their own completion of such tasks, which reflects the Indigenous pedagogy of modelling (Hunt and Oyarzun, 2020; Restoule, 2019; Goulet and Goulet, 2014). Fifth, a small cohort appeared to be a contributing factor to building a stronger online community and increasing opportunities for reciprocal teaching and learning (Tessaro et al., 2019; Smith et al., 2018; Brant, 2013). However, this suggestion has an institutional implication and might not be available to teachers and designers, as class sizes may not be dependent on them. Finally, Restoule (2018) demonstrated that large online courses have a potential to build a respectful online community, if designed and taught thoughtfully.

Conclusion

In this chapter, the selection of concepts – flexible online learning, culturally relevant online learning, teacher presence, and online learning community – were informed by the data findings, discussed in Chapter 4, and the Five R’s principles (Restoule, 2018; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991). This review revealed that some online learning challenges have a potential to become opportunities and turn into strengths. It also revealed that studies with FNMIO students at post-secondary institutions are limited and further exploration of FNMIO students’ and teachers personal accounts of their online learning experience to inform learning design and teaching efforts would be beneficial.
Chapter 3: Methodology

In this chapter, I describe my inquiry. First, I restate the research question and specific research objectives. Next, I discuss the ethics and methodology underpinning my inquiry, research design, participants, data collection methods, and approach to analysis. I then reflect on the dilemmas encountered within the inquiry field.

Purpose and Research Question

The aim of this inquiry was to better understand the online learning and teaching experience of FNMIO students and teachers at post-secondary institutions in Canada. The research question formulated to address this was: **What stories do Indigenous students and teachers tell about their online learning and teaching experience at Canadian post-secondary institutions?** This inquiry was guided by the following specific objectives:

1. Identify the opportunities driving online learning and the challenges in the successful delivery of online learning for Indigenous populations within a post-secondary context in Canada.
2. Critically review existing research in relation to this inquiry.
3. Witness Indigenous students’ and teachers’ views and stories of their online learning experience.
4. Articulate design recommendations for ways to integrate Indigenous perspectives and pedagogies in designing and teaching online learning courses within a post-secondary context in Canada.

Objectives 1 and 2 were partly addressed in Chapter 2: Literature Review, and further explored in Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion. Objective 3 was achieved through the collection and analysis of data obtained from FNMIO participants. This data, combined with the findings from the literature review, enabled me to build a deeper understanding of the online learning experiences and perspectives among the FNMIO participants. Consequently, the findings and discussion chapter will contribute recommendations for designing and teaching online courses within a post-secondary setting (Objective 4).

A Note on Witnessing

Objective 3 states that this research aimed to witness FNMIO participants’ stories. Being a witness to an event or story, one is granted a responsibility to carry it forward, to share it with others and act on it (Felman and Laub, 1992, cited in Iseke, 2011). Thus, to witness the
participants’ stories includes hearing their voice and ensuring that it influences my and other educators’ practice. Therefore, articulating a list of considerations for online teaching and learning design (Objective 4) is a core part of my methodological approach.

**Ethical Considerations**

This inquiry was designed in compliance with the ethical guidelines of the Government of Canada’s Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans (Government of Canada, 2018), with special attention paid to Chapter 9: Research Involving the First Nations, Inuit and Métis Peoples of Canada (Appendix C), and was approved by the University of Edinburgh Research Ethics Committee. I completed the First Nations’ Fundamentals of OCAP (FNIGC, no date) training, to gain a deeper understanding of ethical protocols of research involving the First Nations peoples (Appendix D).

Entering the inquiry field as a non-Indigenous researcher, I was cognizant of the fact that Indigenous peoples were historically over-researched through irrelevant and disrespectful research practices (Government of Canada, 2018; Smith, 1999). Therefore, my position as a non-Indigenous researcher accompanied me from the start and I frequently pondered whether I should continue. However, I knew I could not stop because I carried responsibility (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991) to complete this work. I was encouraged by Battiste (2013), who argued that ‘decolonization belongs to everyone’ (p. 13). In a similar vein, the TRC (2015) called on Canada to create equitable educational opportunities for FNMIO students, and I recognized my role.

To avoid continuing the non-Indigenous research narrative done on Indigenous people, I employed ethics as a design method, starting from determining the research questions, through methodology to data collection methods and recruitment, and consulted with FNMIO colleagues to verify the appropriateness and relevancy (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991) of this research for the FNMIO participants. One of the questions raised during the consultations regarded community engagement and obtaining consent from the communities represented by the participants involved in this study. However, because this research was completed in the digital post-secondary realm and did not focus on a specific Indigenous community, it was determined that community consultation was not necessary, as in Davey (2019). The participants concurred. By involving participants and Indigenous colleagues who work with students in post-secondary contexts, I aimed to uphold the ethical principles of relevancy and respect (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991).
Narrative Inquiry

‘The truth about stories is that that’s all we are.’ (King, 2003, p. 10)

Given that the aim of this inquiry was to explore the online learning experiences of FNMIO students and teachers at post-secondary Canadian institutions, narrative inquiry was selected as this study's research methodology paradigm. By focusing on lived experiences as data, narrative inquiry engenders storytelling, which is a primary knowledge-seeking method within Indigenous frameworks and a way of living and learning for Indigenous peoples (Kovach, 2009). Clandinin and Connelly define narrative inquiry as ‘stories lived and told’ (2000, p. 20). Narrative inquiry draws upon John Dewey's view of experience as tri-dimensional, represented by situation, continuity, and interaction (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The past experiences are interpreted through our present lens, and as such give a window into the future, as experiences are fluid and connected (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). In that sense, experiences build on one another. Even if we experience something new, our interpretation of that event and reactions to it are informed by prior experiences. Therefore, recalling stories about memorable learning experiences helps to create a deeper understanding of what can be possible (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). The decision to implement the narrative inquiry methodology was driven by my goal to collect and reveal online learning experiences of Indigenous students and teachers at post-secondary institutions in Canada to inform online course design and delivery.

Study Design

The data collection strategies reflected the Indigenous traditions of oral ways of passing knowledge, focused on lived experiences, and aimed to foster relationship building with the participants.

1. Life Story: a one-on-one autobiographical interview designed as a starting point to building relationships (Wilson, 2008) with participants and to collect life histories, as they relate to the topic of the study. It was planned as an unstructured exchange, where participants had an opportunity to share aspects of their background to ‘put their experience in context’ (Seidman, 2006, p. 17).

2. Details of Experience: the second one-on-one interview invited participants to reconstruct concrete experiences (Seidman, 2006) and describe situations where they felt most or least engaged while learning online.
Sharing Circle: a traditional Indigenous group dialog approach to ensure all voices are heard (Drawson, Toombs, and Mushquash, 2017), where a speaking object is passed between circle participants to signal whose voice is to be heard next, without interruptions (First Nations Pedagogy Online, 2009). The Circle aimed to focus on reflecting on the experience and generating ideas for future online learning for FNMIO students. A group interview would in some cases follow individual interviews, but in this case the order was reversed, the reason being that by the time we reached the Circle, participants and I would have established a relationship with each other.

Piloting the Interviews
The interview schedule was piloted in July 2019 with Christine, from Nigeria, who had consented to being named in the study. The goal of the pilot study was to assess the clarity and outcomes of my question prompts and test the recording technology. Christine’s responses addressed my curiosities regarding the feasibility of my questions, which remained unchanged as a result of the pilot. For technology purposes, it was identified that I would need two devices: a phone app and a handheld recorder as backup for any subsequent interviews. This pilot increased my confidence and aided my preparation for interviewing the FNMIO participants.

My motivation to pilot the study with a non-FNMIO person may appear inconsistent with my proposed study plan. However, having an established relationship with a willing volunteer was timely. I chose Christine based on her non-White, non-Euro-Western background, whose ancestors paralleled having experienced colonisation by the British. Having considered the goals of this research and inclusive research practices of Indigenous scholars (e.g. Lavallée, 2009), it appeared to not compromise my planned methodology. However, to ensure relevancy (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991) of this research to FNMIO students and teachers, the pilot data was disregarded in the data analysis.

Participants
Seven FNMIO participants were recruited through purposeful and snowball sampling techniques. I circulated an invitation among my colleagues and friends. I also signed up for an Indigenous language class, to expand my network and immerse myself in the language and culture, and this introduced me to one of the participants. In addition, some participants disseminated the invitation orally and via social media.
Participants self-identified as FNMIO students and teachers, studying or teaching online at Canadian post-secondary institutions (Table 1). Since the ethical guidelines in Government of Canada (2018) define Indigenous peoples according to the Canadian Constitution as First Nations, Métis, and Inuit, a US-Blackfoot person did not fit the definition. Therefore, I took additional steps and followed Absolon’s explanation of Indigenous as ‘Aboriginal, First Nations, Native, Indian, Inuit or Métis’ (2011, p. 22), based on ‘genealogy, nation, family, and community’ (p. 22), rather than legal labels dictated by the Canadian Government, hence the abbreviation FNMIO (First Nations, Métis, Inuit, Other Indigenous).

All participants voluntarily signed a consent form prior to scheduling the first interview (Appendix A). Consent was re-confirmed orally, prior to each interview. Through my detailed invitation letter, participants were informed of their right to withdraw from the study, and about potential benefits and risks. Identification by name was provided as an option, to align with cultural traditions (Kara, 2018; Kovach, 2009). One participant signed the consent form but explained that they felt reluctant to join a Sharing Circle with other students due to their role as a teacher, even if they were not their teacher. The person was concerned about power relations and did not want to influence the conversation dynamics. We agreed that there would be multiple Sharing Circles. My ethical decisions prioritized participants and gave them the opportunity to shape this research.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Age</th>
<th>Ethnicity and Gender</th>
<th>Academic Level</th>
<th>Primary Role</th>
<th>Location</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alicja</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Métis two-spirit person</td>
<td>M.Ed. in progress</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lisa</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Métis woman</td>
<td>M.Ed. in progress</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nuna</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Manitoba Cree woman</td>
<td>PhD</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>Rural (Northern Manitoba)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rob</td>
<td>20s</td>
<td>Inuit Canadian man</td>
<td>MD in progress</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandra</td>
<td>30s</td>
<td>Métis woman</td>
<td>PhD in progress</td>
<td>Student &amp; Teacher</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tracy</td>
<td>40s</td>
<td>Métis woman</td>
<td>M.Ed. in progress</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Urban</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wilhelmina</td>
<td>60s</td>
<td>U.S. Blackfoot</td>
<td>PhD in progress</td>
<td>Student</td>
<td>Rural (Northern Manitoba)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 1. Participants’ Demographics

Data Collection

Respecting participants’ agency and privacy was paramount in this inquiry. Participants were invited to suggest their preferred meeting times, to select the modality of interviews either face-to-face or online, and to choose whether to join a Sharing Circle or meet with me privately. Interview questions were shared with participants in advance (Appendix B).

5 For more information on the two-spirit term, see section ‘Approach’ of GEEP (no date). Reference suggested by Alicja.
Data collection occurred between August 2019 and April 2020. Access to participants and their availability impacted the timeline. Interviews were conducted as I obtained access to new participants, so scheduling of interviews and the Sharing Circle was delayed. Participant availability and interview modality preferences also contributed to delays. One remote participant preferred meeting face-to-face, therefore we waited for the next available opportunity. Initially, my plan was to host the Sharing Circle face-to-face, but because of participant availability and a pandemic lockdown, multiple Sharing Circles happened in small groups online, using a web-conferencing technology. Only one participant refrained from joining a circle and requested a one-on-one meeting.

Thirteen interviews were held online via a web-conferencing technology and four were held face-to-face. I audio-recorded the interviews using a hand-held digital recorder and as backup, a phone app. During the interviews I took sporadic notes of technical disruptions and items to revisit. In face-to-face interviews, notetaking appeared to disrupt the conversation because, as the visual connection was lost, so was the flow of the conversation. Notetaking during virtual interviews seemed possible as the visual connection was not as embodied as face-to-face; one never knows whether the researcher or participant is looking into the camera or at another window placed in the camera view. Because of that, notetaking during online interviews felt dishonest, so I focused on making mental notes and followed up with copious post-interview notetaking.

Both face-to-face and virtual interviews were fraught with technical challenges. In one face-to-face interview, my phone app stopped working as I received an unexpected phone call. I only realized the app stopped working after the interview was completed. Luckily, we lost only 10 minutes of the conversation and were able to return to the topic at our next meeting. This had a positive impact on the subsequent face-to-face interview, in that having a shared knowledge of what had been said resulted in a deeper follow-up conversation. Other technical challenges during online interviews included frozen screens and latency. During Sharing Circles, the web-conferencing tool ended the meetings after 40 minutes, which disrupted the conversation flow. One participant was unable to reconnect for approximately 20 minutes, which lengthened the meeting to two hours. Unlike face-to-face interviews, the conversational tone was difficult to achieve in online interviews as the audio would frequently freeze when I tried to comment, ask an additional question, or even verbally show that I was listening. I needed to wait my turn to participate in the exchange, which stifled the flow and intended conversational tone of the interviews.
I saved the recordings and transcripts in an offline, encrypted computer location. I also uploaded them to my OneDrive folder and invited the participants to access their data to verify accuracy and completeness. Participants were able to download their files from the OneDrive folder, as per the principles of data ownership in research with Indigenous peoples (Government of Canada, 2018). Five out of seven participants confirmed the accuracy of their transcripts and two did not reply. All transcripts were anonymized, with pseudonyms assigned to participants to protect their privacy.

An essential principle of researching with Indigenous peoples is reciprocity (Government of Canada, 2018). During face-to-face interviews, I offered small gifts, e.g. ceremonial tobacco, and invited participants for lunch. Online interviews were disadvantageous in this respect as I was unable to share a meal with participants. In honouring the time invested and the passing of knowledge to me, participants were offered a monetary gift of CA$100 upon completion of the interviews. To ensure that the gifts were relevant to participants, I enquired about their preferred method of payment: two accepted e-transfers, one requested a donation be made to an Indigenous organization in Winnipeg, and four declined the offer.

Data Analysis

Two complementary approaches were used to analyse the data: contextualization and an inductive thematic analysis. Through contextualization, the participants’ accounts were re-storied, to situate them within context and provide a synopsis of each participant’s online learning experience. Given the extent and richness of data collected, the re-storied accounts were considerable in length, therefore my initial plan of presenting unbounded narratives had to be modified. Consequently, for the purposes of the dissertation the re-storied accounts were abridged. Thematic analysis allowed me to focus on content (Riessman, 2008) and generate themes of importance (Braun and Clark, 2006), thus enabling the subsequent formulation of design and teaching considerations (Bazeley, 2009).
Transcribing was the first step of my analysis (Bailey, 2008), which allowed me to relive the conversations I had with the participants. I did a verbatim transcription, as opposed to summaries, to preserve the integrity of the participants’ stories. As I transcribed, I added notes, questions, and highlighted key areas of interest, as well as places where I saw correlations with other participants’ narratives. I often returned to my journal to review my notes. For example, for one of the interviews I wrote that I was staring at the empty screen for a while before asking the participant if they could switch on the camera. This comment was relevant during analysis as the use of camera live feed is a critical aspect of Theme 4. During transcription, data was cleansed to increase readability. I removed speech fillers and repeated words and changed utterances such as *kinda* to *kind of*. In some instances, I inserted bracketed behavioural annotations to signal ‘laughter’ or ‘giggling’ that may have had significant impact on the meaning of experience. I verified my approach with a participant who teaches research methods, who confirmed that removal of speech patterns would help emphasize the content, despite it altering someone’s words. Participants were given an opportunity to verify the accuracy of their transcripts.

Then I re-read the transcripts. I coded each participant separately with ‘fresh eyes’. It was important to treat each participant as a whole person within their context, and not apply an earlier established coding template (Brooks and King, 2014). I returned to the codes to clarify what they represented and better reflect emerging patterns, using a variety of in-vivo, descriptive, and versus codes (Saldaña, 2013). I coded everything because, ‘you never know what might be interesting later’ (Braun and Clarke, 2006) and because every piece of experience the participants shared represented their voice that I aimed to amplify through

![Diagram of data analysis process](image-url)
this study. Having coded the transcripts using the comments feature in Microsoft Word, I exported the codes and corresponding excerpts from the transcripts to a spreadsheet (Knoch, 2018) and began categorizing them, thereby identifying initial themes, as shown in see Figure 2.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>TECHNOLOGY</th>
<th>TEACHER</th>
<th>LEARNER</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Access to tech</td>
<td>&quot;The world is a teacher&quot;</td>
<td>SDL using YouTube</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Technical challenges</td>
<td>Lack of teacher investment</td>
<td>Procrastination</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2. An example of code categories.

Categories were then evaluated, and initial themes generated. I revisited my data to verify the themes and chose to merge some themes. This process resulted in three overarching themes: Opportunities and Challenges, Reciprocal Relationships, The Ramifications of Covid-19. The third theme was later eliminated as only four participants interviewed at the start of the pandemic lockdown reflected on its impact.

Conclusion

Chapter 3 summarized my methodology, which included the ethical and methodological underpinnings, inquiry design, selection of participants, data collection and data analysis, and my reflections on dilemmas. Data was collected through oral methods aimed to stimulate sharing stories of online learning experiences. The methods included nine private interviews and four virtual Sharing Circles.
Chapter 4: Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this inquiry was to explore the lived experiences of FNMIO participants in online learning at Canadian post-secondary institutions. In this chapter, I present and discuss the findings from two interwoven data analysis processes of contextualization and an inductive thematic analysis (Braun and Clarke, 2006). Contextualization resulted in seven participant portraits, to situate the individuals within this study and introduce them to the reader. Each portrait provides a person’s background information, how we met and formed a relationship, and noteworthy highlights from their educational experiences, reflective of the three dimensions of the temporal, personal and social, and locational narrative inquiry space (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Such emphasis on personal backgrounds is necessary to fully understand their stories as each brings a unique perspective to this study as students, teachers, and members of various Indigenous communities. It is an authentic representation of cultural accountability for one’s subjective voice (Kovach, 2009).

Following the personal portraits, I discuss the results of the thematic analysis, which generated two overarching categories of stories retold by the participants. *Opportunities and Challenges* encapsulated the advantages and disadvantages of online learning. *Reciprocal Relationships* encapsulated the role and impact of peers in online learning and the importance of teacher presence. The themes overlapped. Illustrative quotes from the interviews are included in each theme to foreground the voice of the participants. Each theme ends with design recommendations drawn from the analysis.

Participants’ Portraits

Alicja is a two-spirit Métis person. She and her partner were pregnant with their first child at the time of the interviews. She works for a community organization leading Indigenous community engagement initiatives. She self-describes as a White-coded Métis person, proud to be living on her ancestral lands in Treaty 1 land. Alicja is taking a Master of Education program that focuses on Indigenous pedagogy, with a Canadian university outside of Manitoba. She usually travels to attend short, intensive, face-to-face sessions; the online course we spoke about was the only mandatory online course. The program requires students to learn from the land, one another, and their teachers (Themes 6 & 7), which Alicja says is deeply relational. Therefore, it did not surprise me when Alicja stated that although her online course was convenient, it was impersonal and lacked in
relationality (Theme 4); it did not provide opportunities to build reciprocal relationships. Alicja and I met through a professional engagement.

Lisa is a Métis woman from Saskatchewan, who recently relocated to a city in Treaty 1 territory. Being a Métis youth in a predominantly White school, she disliked school as she felt she did not fit in and that other youths were afraid of her. This led to challenges staying in school. A change came in her undergraduate studies, which focused on Indigenous pedagogies, where she was surrounded by Métis peers. She decided to become a teacher and began to enjoy learning. Up to that point, her education had been classroom based. She is now studying online for her Master of Education, which is a requirement for her profession. She works in a leadership role at an Indigenous adult learning centre, where she runs a literacy program. Lisa encourages FNMIO students to take their courses online because they are convenient and flexible (Theme 1). Lisa and I connected through a community referral.

Nuna is a Cree woman from a northern Manitoba community in Treaty 5 territory and is a mother of four sons. Her grandparents were trappers and hunters, and her mother grew up on the land. She comes from a hydro-affected community and is a water activist. About her education journey, Nuna says: ‘postsecondary education, to be honest, wasn’t on my radar when I first started going to university’. However, she found her voice upon completion of her master's degree, went on to obtain her doctorate, and that was when she developed a passion for teaching. Although she has never been a student in an online course, she strongly advocates for online learning at her institution, and enjoys teaching online. She speaks Cree, her ancestral language. Nuna and I met through a professional engagement.

Rob is a 29-year-old Inuit Canadian man, who grew up with three sisters in British Columbia. He described his home environment as supportive, therefore he believes that anyone can achieve any goals they set their mind to, which led him to pursue a medical degree. He found his educational journey a rich but challenging one, as he struggled with learning in the current school model. At the age of 28, his suspicions of a learning disability were confirmed with a diagnosis of moderate dyslexia. His educational attainment saw a positive turn when he discovered YouTube and podcasts: ‘If it wasn’t for YouTube, I wouldn’t be here’ (Rob). This enhanced his learning, not only because of the visual aspect, but...
but also because of the inspirational teachers who willingly shared their knowledge through YouTube. We connected at a community event on Treaty 1 territory.

**Sandra** is a Métis woman who lives on Treaty 1 land in Manitoba with her spouse who works online, and a young daughter. She started her post-secondary education as a mature student, obtaining a Bachelor of Education, initially in face-to-face classes and then completed it online while traveling in Europe. She later completed a post-baccalaureate diploma online, and a Master of Native Studies face-to-face. Currently, she is a PhD student. She self-describes as highly driven and self-motivated, involved in several things at any one time. She works in various capacities at a post-secondary institution, including teaching online and assisting other teachers in face-to-face classes. She is an avid proponent of flexible online learning, valuing the freedom it affords to learn when one is at their best (Theme 1). Sandra and I met at an Indigenous language learning event.

**Tracy** is a Métis woman who lives in Treaty 1 territory with her husband, who works online, and a young daughter. Her father was French Métis, and her mother was Irish-English. Her choice of academic discipline and career was inspired by an online teacher, a second-generation immigrant from India, whose teaching of Canadian history included undistorted details of Indigenous-Canadian relations, often omitted or whitewashed in mainstream school curricula at that time. It was the teacher’s engagement with the students, and passion for the topic, that turned that online course into a life-changing and memorable experience (Theme 7). Tracy works as an educational developer at a post-secondary institution and is currently at the dissertation stage of an online Master of Education program. Tracy considers the visual aspect of online courses to be critical in enhancing the learning for FNMIO and non-FNMIO students alike (Theme 3). Tracy and I met through a community referral.

**Wilhelmina** is an American of Blackfoot descent on her maternal side. With her Canadian husband, she has lived in Treaty 5 territory since the 1980s, where she started teaching during her undergraduate studies. After moving to a community in Treaty 5 territory, she completed her undergraduate degree via distance learning, but rather joylessly reminisced about the long turnaround times for assignments that were then done by mail. She admits to being a learning addict who much prefers today’s instantaneous exchange of information that the internet and fast bandwidth connectivity affords. She loves learning online and has completed her post-graduate diploma in instructional design, her Master in Distance
Education, and is currently in a Doctor of Education in Distance Education program, all online. Although she is a keen collaborator in online learning environments and enjoys learning with others, she declares having a love-hate relationship with discussion fora. Wilhelmina and I met at a professional engagement.

Themes

The thematic findings are interlinked with the participants’ portraits. Figure 3 presents the two prevalent categories and seven themes. Read together, the findings aim to present the lived experiences of the FNMIO participants.

Figure 3. Categories and themes generated through the thematic analysis.

Theme 1: Widening Participation

Participants commented on increased opportunities for academic and professional development afforded by the flexibility and convenience of online learning. Decisions to pursue online learning involved consideration of the limitations of time, location, and availability of desired specialty. Four participants commented on the importance of maintaining family cohesion and education fitting their lifestyles. One participant emphasized the value of online learning in harsh Manitoban winters.

Locational Flexibility

For example, Wilhelmina observed that professional development opportunities are limited outside of major urban areas, especially when one is living in a remote northern Manitoba location. Accessing desired educational opportunities via online learning
alleviated the necessity to leave or migrate her family to attend classes at a bricks-and-mortar campus. In a similar vein, education followed geographical movements of another participant, Sandra said:

In my first degree, I took a lot of in-class courses ... But I also found that I could accomplish more if I took online courses at the same time. So, I started in the second term of my first degree taking a mix of online courses and in-class courses. And then by second year, I was taking half and half. In my third year, I spent three terms abroad and did only online courses. So, I paired online courses to where I was in the world. So, ... I did Greek civilization when I was in Greece ... it was a really amazing experience to do my courses.

Sandra indicated that online learning allowed her to achieve more, personally, and academically. By taking online courses, she avoided pausing her education while travelling in Europe, thus confirming the assertion by Selwyn (2011) that student’s geographic mobility constituted a determinant in expectations of online learning flexibility. This flexibility of online learning empowered Sandra to control her educational experience, as opposed to being controlled by the schedules and campus-based locations of face-to-face courses.

Although locational flexibility was not a factor in Lisa’s decision to study online, in retrospect she appreciated it. Having missed a deadline for a face-to-face program, Lisa avoided delaying her post-graduate studies by registering in a parallel program online through another university. When asked if she now appreciated missing the deadline, Lisa responded unhesitatingly:

I am ... if I was at [university], I would probably be on campus now hating life ... I’m just thinking oh my god I have to get on the bus at 10 o’clock now?

Lisa reminisced about not having to take public transport to face-to-face classes on a winter evening. It is worth noting that the interview was conducted in February, when the outside temperature was -20 Celsius. Such weather poses risks to anyone outdoors, especially for travel, regardless of their urban or rural location. Lisa’s weather commentary resonated with my experience of working with First Nations students at an adult learning centre, where they travelled 25 km to school in a shared vehicle from a nearby reserve. Given the local winter weather severity, online learning appears to afford a safer learning environment for some FNMIO students in Manitoba, provided they have access to
appropriate technology. Transportation issues resulting in interrupted access to education were also identified by Spronk and Radtke (1988).

Reinforced in the literature, weather was considered in a study McAuley and Walton (2011). ‘Bringing people together is … often impossible because of extreme weather conditions’ (p.18). The Nunavut Master of Education program in this study was designed as blended, with face-to-face courses on a mainstream university campus during the summer months and online courses during the winter months. The blended design alleviated Inuit students from needing to leave families and communities during arctic winter conditions. Like Wilhelmina, Sandra, and Lisa, the Inuit students enrolled in the NMEd program, residing in distant communities across Nunavut, were able to ‘learn where they live’ (Cochrane and Maposa, 2018, p. 1).

Temporal Flexibility

Many participants valued the temporal flexibility afforded by online learning. When asked about their preferred study times, participants expressed a need to navigate familial and professional commitments and utilize time interstices as they appeared during the day: ‘whenever I’m free,’ said Lisa. Tracy expressed a habit of studying early in the morning and reflected on the fatigue of studying as an adult learner with employment and childcare obligations: ‘evenings don’t work,’ said Tracy. To avoid distractions, Wilhelmina preferred uninterrupted, late-night study sessions: ‘I’ve been known to sit at the kitchen table from 10 o’clock in the evening until 6 o’clock the next morning,’ said Wilhelmina. These participants probably would not have been able to attend face-to-face classes without major compromises. Studying online enabled them to access education on their own terms.

The locational and temporal flexibility afforded by online learning enabled the FNMIO participants to access education, despite diverse personal circumstances, needs, and study patterns. Such diversity indicates a need for pedagogical flexibility in online learning. Teachers should design online learning environments that enable self-pacing, to allow FNMIO students to create their own learning paths in terms of study times and intensity, for example, by not mandating collaborative work or scheduling timed exams. Sandra would have been inconvenienced and subjected to anxiety in needing to find a quiet exam location while traveling with her family in Europe. Such a flexible teaching and learning approach would increase FNMIO participants’ control over their educational experience.
and enable them to complete programs while feeling respected ‘as a people’ (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991, p. 6).

Theme 2: Capacity building
This theme captured FNMIO perspectives and experiences centring on capacity building potential of online learning. For this report, capacity building is defined as increased opportunities for the dissemination of Indigenous knowledges to wider audiences and building local qualified workforce, exposure to diversity, and personal empowerment.

**Dissemination of Knowledge**
Online learning enables wider dissemination of Indigenous worldviews and knowledges. According to Nuna, capacity building and outreach are the biggest assets of digital education. She said, ‘I was really motivated by the idea of getting that knowledge out there to a few more people’. Owing to online learning, Nuna’s expertise in the history and impacts of colonialism is not limited to classroom teaching on campus; instead, she can impart it to all students enrolled in her online course, regardless of locational or personal circumstances that preclude them from attending on campus. As discussed in the literature review, some online courses focus on disseminating Indigenous worldviews to global audiences; for example, University of Toronto’s Aboriginal Worldviews and Education (8,424 enrollments as of 20 September 2020). As online learning becomes more accessible across Manitoba and Canada, more people can expand their understanding of Indigenous topics.

Online learning research in remote Indigenous contexts echoes Nuna’s views on the benefits of digital education. Two studies discussed in the literature, Tessaro *et al.* (2019) and McAuley and Walton (2011) elaborated on partnerships between post-secondary institutions and remote communities to develop and deliver specialized programming to increase the capacity of a local workforce, thus lessening dependence on external expertise. Therefore, online learning plays an essential role in building capacity of both FNMIO and non-FNMIO populations.

**Exposure to Diversity**
Participants—Sandra, Wilhelmina, and Alicja—expressed their appreciation of being exposed to geographical and cultural diversity among peers from various locations across North America and the world. Alicja said:
Our cohort stretches from folks from Arizona to Hawaii and then from the Mi’kmaq territory [Atlantic Canada] all the way to BC [British Columbia] ... It’s great that there’s this forum to bring us together.

Such view is reinforced by the literature. Tessaro et al. (2019) found that FNMIO students, who were principals of remote school districts in various First Nations’ communities across Canada, appreciated connecting and forming a support network. This would not be possible otherwise, as they would be unlikely to be able to meet in person or even online. The online course helped them find commonalities, e.g., delivering provincial curriculum, and strengthening their capacity and voice as a professional group.

**Personal Empowerment**

Participants who teach Indigenous students commented that their students are often shyer than those from the dominant culture. This could be due to individual personality traits, the impact of the intergenerational trauma, or cultural differences between more outspoken Western culture and quieter FNMIO cultures. Nuna noted that students get bashful when prompted to discuss difficult topics, such as colonization. She sees it as a major barrier in a face-to-face classroom, which may block students from active participation and learning, and an advantage in asynchronous online learning, which permits time to think. This is echoed by Brant (2013), who emphasized that reflective pauses before speaking constitute part of her Indigenous traditions; however, referencing Dumbrill and Rice-Green (2008), she attributed the oral hesitancy to colonialism. She reflected on the danger of being silenced by a non-FNMIO student who would attempt to fill the reflective pause in a classroom environment. She concluded that online learning enabled her to articulate her voice to asynchronous discussions, without the fear of being silenced.

This theme showed that capacity building is one of the benefits of online learning within Indigenous contexts. Not only individual students benefit from online learning, but also remote FNMIO communities as well as the Canadian society.

**Theme 3: Digital Inequity**

Despite the opportunities afforded by online learning (Themes 1 & 2), technical challenges and barriers persist that limit or preclude FNMIO students from participating in digital education. Digital inequity includes issues related to digital access and affordability.

Participants reported having reliable access to the internet and/or cell reception most of the time during their studies or teaching. However, the same could not be said about the students of those who teach. Two participants – Lisa and Tracy – commented on being
introduced to various learning technologies in their Master of Education programs and expressing willingness to incorporate them in their teaching. What prevented them from doing so was students’ lack of access to appropriate computer devices and internet: ‘I don’t incorporate a lot of technology because I know that at home they don’t have the technology,’ stated Lisa, referring to her FNMIO students living in an urban area. For that reason, Lisa and Tracy felt it was redundant to invest time in learning those technologies as they were not able to benefit from their new-found knowledge. Learning about the potentials of educational technology seems important from a curriculum perspective, to increase informed decision-making capacity, however when faced with the educators’ reality such knowledge quickly becomes obsolescent, if unused. This indicates a gap between the expectations of post-secondary programs and the reality of professional contexts.

Participants commented on frustrations regarding connectivity issues, which either prevented them from streaming video during synchronous sessions or precluded them from incorporating such sessions. Nuna observed that many students living in northern communities have access to mobile phones only, therefore prioritizing the need to design online courses for mobile learning exists. She proposed a solution for institutions to include device costs in tuition, or lend appropriate devices to students for the duration of their studies. In a similar attempt to alleviate the digital inequity, the University of Cape Town, South Africa, provides devices to students in financial need and offers internet bundles (Walji, 2020).

Online learning can widen participation and build capacity of FNMIO students and communities having internet access, which is fundamental to the delivery of online learning. However, many FNMIO students living in urban and remote areas appear to have insufficient internet infrastructure to enable them to access online learning. In 2018, internet access of 50/10 Mbps speed was available in only 1.8% of households on First Nations reserves in Manitoba, compared to the widely available 300+ Mbps speeds in a major city, while many Indigenous communities have satellite access or none (CRTC, 2019). Akoh (2018) reported conducting educational research in a fly-in community with no cell reception available. The digital inequity described by the participants creates opportunities for post-secondary institutions to partner with FNMIO communities and together solicit funding to develop infrastructure and educational programs that can meet
community needs. For course designers, this data suggests building courses that are resilient, low-bandwidth, and accessible on various devices.

**Theme 4: Text-Based Dominance**

This theme captured participants’ challenges with the prevalent text-based style of online courses.

The dominance of text-based learning materials and written communications presented cognitive challenges for FNMIO students. Two participants decried a limited choice of expression allowable for completing assignments. Alicja said:

> We had to do weekly summarizing and commenting on other folks’ posts, and I know that those first few weeks was very difficult to press enter because I kept thinking this is locked in stone forever and I am never allowed to change my opinion on what I’m thinking here...I am an oral thinker.

Alicja implied a tension between the oral tradition of Indigenous cultures versus the written tradition of the academic canon. FNMIO students may not see themselves reflected in such environments and struggle participating (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991). Alicja perceived written work as unalterable, as most Learning Management Systems do not allow students to edit discussion posts. Alternative forms of expression could include video/audio-based asynchronous discussions, and synchronous events to enable the immediacy and fluidity of oral expression, as indicated by Alicja.

While Alicja preferred to engage in spoken discourse, Wilhelmina insisted on opportunities for visual expression, using video, drawings, and interactive digital tools. In one online class she recalled posting, ‘I can’t handle any more print reading’ on the discussion forum, followed by a visually enhanced reflection on a reading. This sparked a positive response from peers, who began following her lead. Wilhelmina commented, ‘they were fun to read, they were visually stimulating, and they gave you the insight more into the person than just reading a journal entry after a journal entry.’ She shared examples of her digital journals with cartoon drawings and mind-maps (Figure 4).
Figure 4. Wilhelmina’s blog post excerpt, edited to remove school information. Used with author’s permission.

Rob corroborated this view. As a medical degree graduate, he believed that he would not have achieved this level of education without YouTube to augment his learning. He emphasized his preference for a visual input modality over a text-based one, ‘I’m a huge advocate for YouTube because I am a visual learner.’ When he was 28 years old, Rob was diagnosed with minor dyslexia. It was a revelation for him, as he finally understood why he had struggled with the written word. Rob’s experience suggests that instructional materials should be provided in multimodal formats, to address diverse multisensory and cultural needs of online learners. Frameworks such as Universal Design for Learning promote accessibility and provide guidance on developing inclusive online materials (Morong and DesBiens, 2016). Since text-based materials present cognitive challenges for some FNMIO students, provision of multimodal resources would help their learning.

Nevertheless, despite rather negative earlier views on written expression, Alicja described a highly successful written assignment, which resulted in it being submitted for a scholarly publication by her teacher. Alicja attributed her success to an engaging reading that compared a literature review to a dinner party. The metaphor served as a scaffolding element in completing the assignment by helping Alicja visualize the purpose and structure of a literature review.
Participants’ challenges with text-based online learning aligns with local and international research conducted within Indigenous contexts (e.g., Bartmes and Shukla, 2020; Foster and Meehan, 2007). In Indigenous communities, knowledge has been passed on between generations through stories lived and told (Cajete, 1994), therefore orality is a fundamental facet of Indigenous cultures and knowledge systems (Kovach, 2009), and as such it influenced the methodology in this inquiry. Conversely, Stiffarm (1998) and Brant (2013) found that writing played a pivotal role in personal healing and scholarly development. In Theme 2, the benefits of asynchronous discussion space for the shyer students and those with social anxieties were discussed. Nevertheless, Dumbrill and Green (2008) identified a problem in ‘privileging text-based knowledge over Other ways of knowing, and also from the ways some forms of knowledge, such as Indigenous knowledge, are not easily translated into text’ (p. 501). The challenge appears to be in finding a balance between the academic writing tradition and oral expressions of knowledge. Offering a choice of alternative assignment formats would increase relevancy and enable FNMIO students to express themselves in preferred modes. In addition, use of visual metaphors would further enhance FNMIO learning by respecting Indigenous cultural and educational traditions (St. Clair, 2000; Michell, 2009).

The above challenges expressed by the FNMIO participants indicate an urgent need for greater institutional investments in indigenizing efforts to create online learning environments that are conducive to FNMIO students’ learning and achievement. Professional development and online course re-designs should become a priority. Alternative assessment solutions should be sought to not only provide opportunities to demonstrate skills, but also to increase relevancy of the assignments to the FNMIO student’s cultural needs (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991).

**Theme 5: Impersonal Environment**

This theme captured participants’ strong feelings about disconnectedness and isolation in online learning. All participants deemed online learning to be impersonal, resultant from the physical distance, and limiting prospects of forming relationships with peers and the teacher. Their experiences and perspectives revealed that technology lacks the capacity to emulate the embodied and interconnected learning experience of face-to-face environments, a feature that is at the core of the Indigenous culture.
Screen as a Barrier

Participants expressed that the screen served as a barrier to establishing respectful connections. According to Lisa and Alicja, individuals were more apt to make insensitive comments online ‘because you don’t have to have a face-to-face connection. Like a human interaction. You’re just staring at the screen.’ (Lisa). Such an environment seems to create a perception that one is anonymous, thereby creating greater authority to produce derogatory comments towards others without accountability. Lisa referred to those individuals as ‘keyboard warriors.’ The perceived anonymity lessened accountability for one’s actions and generated heated discussions between FNMIO and non-FNMIO individuals in online environments, creating a perception that online learning may not be culturally safe.

Distractions emanating from the screen during synchronous events also led to a sense of disconnectedness. Lisa stated:

The first time I was in my ZOOM session with my class it was weird...So, most of the time I just turned my camera off. Just because it made me uncomfortable. I didn’t know where to look ... who to look at, even now who do I look at.

Lisa found being on camera distracting. This was her experience during her first class, and after having taken three online courses, during our interview. The persistence of the self-video-stream heightened her self-consciousness and resulted in moments of disconnectedness from others and distraction, while she looked at herself. Due to her discomfort with such an environment, she would self-regulate and disconnect her camera, leading to a concern that others would feel she was disengaged. However, when asked about the value of having camera streams in synchronous sessions, she stated that ‘absolutely, otherwise we’d be a bunch of strangers, so it’s really helpful to put a face to a name.’ Such conflicting perceptions indicated a juxtaposition between the desire to be present and her personal anxiety relating to seeing herself on screen.

Lack of Body Cues

Absence of observable body language and limited ability to project personality and passion through the screen were troublesome for Nuna. In a face-to-face classroom, Nuna values corporeal cues to evaluate students’ understanding and intervene with additional guidance, especially when teaching about colonialism in Canada. However, her corresponding online asynchronous course lacks these cues. Students’ inability to observe a teacher’s body
language, to aid connectedness with the teacher, also worried her. This appears to also limit students’ cultural expression of humour. Leddy (2018) emphasized that ‘humour can ... indicate affection and acceptance, as teasing is a big part of life in Indigenous circles’ (p.15). ‘If they like you, they are going to tease you,’ remarked Nuna.

Limited Opportunities for Relationship Building

Technology was not the only reason participants felt disconnected and isolated online. Poor teaching style and course design were implicated as contributors in shaping the impersonal environment in online courses. Alicja, whose online course was asynchronous and focused solely on knowledge building through reading, summarizing, and essay writing, decried online learning because of its inability to foster aspects of relationality, ‘For me the missing piece is ... the relationality, it’s that I’m not with my peers, I’m not learning from them in the same way’. Not only did the course design not include opportunities for meaningful peer interaction or community/experiential learning, but also the coursework was ‘very burdensome; the amount of work that we had to do, and it was just like you know throwing information at us.’ That precluded any desire to connect with others. She called for social opportunities to be incorporated into online courses and she provided several ideas for enhancing relationality online, including synchronous discussions, location-based face-to-face gatherings, and pre-recorded videos. Conversely, Alicja’s expectations of synchronous events to enhance relationality might not have been fully realized due to frequent technical issues.

The above experiences represented both synchronous and asynchronous learning environments, reflecting a spectrum of challenges resulting in feelings of disconnectedness. Participants commented on the confusing distractions surrounding synchronous events, limited opportunities for peer learning, and lack of immediate and embodied communication to facilitate accountability and encourage cultural expression. Synchronous events may offer a channel for increasing relationality, but they are fraught with technical issues, as discussed in Theme 2. In addition, since Indigenous education is grounded in oral traditions, collective ways of being, and immersion in specific contexts, knowledge acquisition outside of such relational contexts poses challenges to FNMIO students (Castellano, 2000; Cajete, 1994). This may not be easily reconciled and troubleshooted with technological solutions. As found in the literature review, many successful online courses and programs were blended and included either face-to-face gatherings or synchronous events (Tessaro et al., 2019; Root et al., 2019; Cochrane and Maposa, 2018; McAuley and
Walton, 2011). Thoughtful approaches to online course design must be sought to address the unique cultural needs of FNMIO populations. As opposed to Bayne et al.’s statement that ‘face-time is over-valued’ (2020, Ch. 16), face-time plays a significant role in FNMIO’s relational learning.

Theme 6: Role and Impact of Peers

Most participants reported that relationships with peers played a significant role in their online learning experience. However, the spectrum of attitudes towards peer learning ranged from avid proponents to strong opponents. Proponents recounted positive impacts such as enhanced relationality, increased accountability, and heightened confidence in expressing Indigenous perspectives. Conversely, the opponents’ views centred around the loss of flexibility and autonomy in deciding on one’s personal learning path when faced with collaborative work.

**Study Buddy**

Having a committed and trusted study buddy was a survival mechanism for Wilhelmina and Tracy while learning online. Wilhelmina connected with a like-minded peer during her postgraduate studies, and they agreed to complete their courses together. She spoke of ‘the power of two’ and described many assignments that turned into real-world collaborative projects, extending their relationship into their professional contexts: ‘Every project that we did, it took us longer, but it was also done better, and it was immediately applicable’ (Wilhelmina). As a person who is easily susceptible to distractions, Wilhelmina found that a study buddy helped her remain accountable for completing coursework on time: ‘it was the added pressure of meeting someone else’s expectations, not just the instructor’s.’ When asked about an online learning tip to share with other FNMIO students, she wholeheartedly advised having a study buddy to tackle procrastination and distractions. Likewise, Tracy found having a study buddy essential in online learning, and she and a Métis colleague registered for a Master of Education program together and took all the classes concurrently to ‘have back-up.’ Tracy emphasized that together they felt stronger at ‘voicing any concerns or any points that we [they] needed to.’ She reminisced about a few occasions when the indigenization of the curriculum was questioned by non-FNMIO students, and she and her colleague needed to defend it. She found those experiences disappointing and appreciated her colleague ‘chiming in’ to strengthen their position and voice. Although for
different reasons, both Tracy and Wilhelmina benefited from having an ongoing relationship with a trusted study partner throughout their online studies.

**Unclear Peers’ Role**

One person’s account did not reveal a conclusive preference for peer learning opportunities. When I spoke with Lisa, it was not immediately evident that peers played a role in her learning. In most courses she described, she was the only FNMIO student in the cohort and when asked about the most important aspects of online learning for her, she unhesitatingly listed engaging content and a good teacher. She did not mention peers, and the sentiment was also evident when she commented on the importance of class introductions at the commencement of an online course: ‘I didn’t find them useful, it was just like – ok, this is my class. I didn’t give it a lot of thought.’ She participated in the introductory discussions because they were mandatory, but they appeared to have little meaning for her. An interesting development in Lisa’s story happened when she reflected on being the most inspired and engaged online when working with a non-Indigenous peer on a collaborative assignment. Lisa found the collaborative experience engaging and inspiring, especially that her partner agreed to Lisa’s topic. Technology effectively mediated the relationship, enabling them to meet synchronously via a web-conferencing technology to discuss the assignment. This contrasting view was interesting; on the one hand Lisa entered the course without a goal to form relationships with others, instead she was focused on gaining knowledge and obtaining a credential. She was the only FNMIO student in that class and that may have been a factor of wanting to stay outside of the social realm. However, when paired with a peer, she found the experience to be the highlight in her online studies.

**Loss of Flexibility**

By contrast, Sandra found collaborative assignments challenging. As a highly self-directed student, Sandra appreciated flexibility, thus steering away from collaborative work. She disfavoured it as a student, ‘It [group work] was awful.’ And, as a teacher, she does not require it of her students, ‘I suggest opportunities for students to learn from each other … but I don’t make it mandatory.’ She was highly cognizant of the various challenges her online students face from access issues through varied levels of digital literacy to logistical issues of scheduling study sessions with others. Her concerns also revolve around effectiveness and efficiency of group work online, ‘one person does a lot of work, one person doesn’t do a lot of work, and the anxieties around that.’
This research has identified various roles peers play in FNMIO participants’ online learning. Some felt strongly about the benefits of working with peers and actively sought learning community connections, either within their online course environment or outside of it via social media. Others redirected, leaning towards flexibility and independence in determining one’s learning path. Sandra’s experience indicates that there might be an opportunity in designing for social learning without mandating it. Yet Lisa’s account suggests that students might not choose to collaborate voluntarily, but when paired with a peer they might find significant value in such activities. Despite being Métis, all four women – Tracy, Lisa, Alicja, and Sandra - had different expectations regarding peer learning, suggesting individual preferences.

Research reviewed in the literature review underscored the importance of enhancing the sense of community in online courses. The inconclusive findings in this inquiry, of the role of peers, extend the literature review and suggest an avenue for further research. Most participants sought opportunities to learn with peers, whereas Lisa and Sandra showed a different approach, towards flexibility and independence.

Theme 7: Teacher Presence

This theme captured FNMIO participants’ experiences and perceptions pertaining to teacher presence in online learning. Participants commented on the desired characteristics and role of the teacher, revealing a wish to have less formal but highly engaged post-secondary teachers. The importance of a teacher knowing who one’s students are, willingness to extend one’s knowledge base to address students’ needs, and building meaningful relationships were emphasized.

Relationships

Student-teacher relationship was a common thread binding participants’ stories. Participants indicated teachers should be approachable, exhibit a casual teaching style, and be ‘humble enough to recognize that they’re also learning’ (Rob). Teachers were expected to humanize their presence online by sharing aspects of their personal background in a welcome video, and making personal connections with students – ‘When a professor can make personal connections with students ... it changes the way that you’re learning’ (Alicja), to get to know them, their needs, and goals. Given her online learning and teaching experience, Sandra expressed that ‘a lot of instructors online ... don’t create those relationships, so it’s almost as if the ... instructor isn’t a real person.’ She acknowledged
that building meaningful relationships online requires time but emphasized that it is achievable: ‘I have relationships with students I have never seen.’ Rob illustrated a desired student-teacher relationship in his portrayal of an ideal online learning environment, seen in Figure 5.

Figure 5. A representation of Rob’s ideal learning environment.

The image depicts the teacher and learner sitting alongside each other, working simultaneously on parallel projects. While the teacher demonstrates, the learner observes and replicates the experiment, thus learning by observing and doing - ‘Show me how to do something, not tell me how to do something’ (Tracy). Essential in this student-teacher relationship is the provision of timely feedback to reinforce a student’s learning. In Rob’s view, the relationship between the teacher and the student should be ‘more horizontal,’ not hierarchical, as it appears to be in post-secondary education, which echoes the principle of reciprocity (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991). An instructor whose reputation would deter students from enrolling in a course was one who was infamous for the ‘lack of interpersonal connectiveness with the course and the students’ (Wilhelmina).’ The teachers who influenced FNMIO students’ lives were those who made personal connections with them, who inspired through storytelling, and who enabled students to discover knowledge and grow their understanding without interference.

**Cultural Safety**

An essential dimension of the teacher’s role included creating a culturally safe and respectful learning environment, achievable through cultural awareness of Indigenous history and worldviews, sensitive and respectful interpersonal communication skills, and inclusion of culturally relevant content (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991). Alicja’s experience in her mandatory online research methods course illustrated a breach of all three aspects. Given this experience, Alicja noted that future online Indigenous students should not expect online courses to be culturally safe and relevant. Alicja explained, ‘There was some weirdness because it was during the time of the Colten Boushie trial and she would

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7 For more information, see Roach 2020.
constantly ask us what we thought about it.’ The teacher asked questions about this real-world event happening during the course. Alicja and her peers, about 75% of whom were FNMIO, were angered by the intrusive questions in an asynchronous forum, and the teacher’s behaviour was considered disrespectful and inconsiderate. In addition, the teacher’s inquiry about the trial was interpreted as an attempt to fill teacher’s educational gaps: ‘She used us. It wasn’t relevant to the course at all’ (Alicja). Concomitantly, Alicja expressed willingness to educate the teacher to fulfil the reciprocal relationship. However, she felt it was onerous to meet the course expectations while educating the teacher, who should have obtained appropriate cultural knowledge prior to teaching the course, which is echoed in the literature. Pete (2016) calls it an ‘unfair burden’ (p. 85) because non-FNMIO students are not expected to do such work. Pete calls on teachers to use their teaching power, build community relationships, and expand their knowledge so that they can infuse the curriculum with relevant resources.

By contrast to Alicja’s story, Tracy’s experience suggested that cultural safety and relevancy could be achieved if the teacher is committed to addressing students’ needs. She described her most inspiring online non-Indigenous teacher as ‘relatable,’ ‘passionate,’ and ‘respectful.’ Tracy recalled feeling ‘like you were in class with her.’ The teacher exhibited curiosity about the students from the start and supplemented the course with learning material relevant to students’ locations and their local Indigenous communities.

The two contrasting experiences of Alicja and Tracy, both with non-Indigenous teachers, signal that although it is possible to create a culturally safe learning environment if one is knowledgeable about Indigenous perspectives, a need exists for professional development to expand teachers’ cultural sensitivity. Since TRC (2015) called on post-secondary institutions to create equitable educational opportunities for Indigenous students, knowledge and inclusion of Indigenous perspectives should now be considered an expectation of teacher’s professionalism at the post-secondary level.

Absence of Presence

Limited teacher presence or instructional material inadequacy prompted participants to explore instructional options outside of the course to enhance their learning. Participants were explicit in their reactions to this issue. Wilhelmina stated:

We were constantly on YouTube, so it was almost like degree by YouTube because you would have instructors and profossors that were
guiding you through this material whereas with many at [institution] is: here’s the textbook, read it.’

While Wilhelmina and her study partner resorted to watching YouTube videos, which led them to a belief that their degree was achieved through YouTube, Lisa questioned the monetary value of her educational experience, given the necessity to find instructional materials outside of her course environment. Unfortunately for Lisa, she learned that YouTube videos did not suffice, and her grades suffered. Lisa suggested that synchronous sessions would have provided an opportunity to advance her understanding of the material. In Wilhelmina’s case, the learning materials were provided but students would have benefited from additional guidance, perhaps through a guided discussion or a teacher’s video tutorial. Neither participant reported reaching out to the course learning community for support, which suggested none was fostered; only Wilhelmina noted having a study buddy to tackle challenges together. In addition, neither participant reached out to their respective teacher for additional support.

In Lisa’s and Wilhelmina’s cases, the missing instructional material suggested a misaligned course (Biggs, 1999). Alignment in online courses is achieved when all course components support the student’s achievement of the learning outcomes. In these cases, instructional materials were incomplete, and participants struggled to develop comprehension, thus resorting to YouTube. Their achievement of the learning outcomes was jeopardized by the lack of resources. It may have happened that the teacher had no instructional design support or insufficient time to source or create necessary materials. When supports or time are limited to create materials, a list of suggested videos could be provided. Students could be encouraged to use these, and seek other videos to share, which would support collective learning. Building a strong and supportive online learning community from the course commencement could have alleviated moments of a teacher’s absence. Inviting students to co-source the learning materials could have resulted in shifting the perception of using external sources such as YouTube from academic survival to an intentional learning activity.

While the expectations of peer presence (Theme 6) varied among the FNMIO participants, teacher presence was indispensable. Correspondingly, its importance has been emphasized in Chapter 2: Literature Review. ‘Instructors in online courses, like their counterparts in regular classrooms, play a crucial role in students’ knowledge construction by scaffolding the learning process for them’ (Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006, p.101). Interactions and
communication between peers may not happen online without a robust teacher presence (Phirangee, Epp, and Hewitt, 2016). Teachers should strive to expand their knowledge to incorporate multi-perspectives and build relationships in the community to increase the relevancy of their teaching to FNMIO students (Pete, 2016). Teacher’s presence unites an online class.

Conclusions

This chapter presented the findings through contextualised personal portraits of the participants and an inductive thematic analysis, which concluded with seven themes, organized in two overarching categories of opportunities and challenges and reciprocal relationships. The seven themes revealed that designing online courses for FNMIO populations should emphasize flexible opportunities for students to create their own learning paths, social learning to enable peer connections for those who seek such opportunities, and ongoing and consistent teacher presence to support learning. The findings highlighted a need for increased online course design efforts and professional development opportunities for teachers so that meaningful, relevant, and respectful online learning environments are created for FNMIO students. The next chapter summarizes the findings, discusses implications and recommendations, and offers potential avenues for future research.
Chapter 5: Conclusions

The growth of online learning at post-secondary institutions in Canada (Johnson et al., 2019) that attracts global audiences, combined with continued low matriculation numbers of FNMIO students (Statistics Canada, 2017) creates conditions in which FNMIO students’ voices tend to be marginalized and their needs overlooked in online teaching and design approaches. All but one of the FNMIO students in this inquiry were in an ethnic minority in their online courses at various post-secondary institutions across Canada. In addition, the literature review conducted to set this study in context revealed that research about FNMIO student online experiences at mainstream post-secondary institutions is limited. The purpose of this inquiry was to foreground FNMIO students’ and teachers’ voices and explore their stories of lived experiences in learning and teaching online, to advance the understanding of their preferences and needs. Their stories and perspectives provided answers to the principal research question that guided this inquiry: ‘What stories do Indigenous students and teachers tell about their online learning and teaching experience at Canadian post-secondary institutions?’

The research question was intentionally unbounded (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000) as I aimed not to make any assumptions about what those stories could be. I wanted to listen and learn with my eyes and ears open wide. To answer the research question, I implemented a design methodology that was underpinned by the oral traditions of the Indigenous research methodologies (Kovach, 2009), an adaptation of Seidman’s in-depth interview methodology (2013), and three-dimensional narrative inquiry (Clandinin and Connelly, 2000). Data was collected through private and Sharing Circle interviews. The relevance of the research question and choice of research strategies were discussed with Indigenous community members prior to embarking on this inquiry and during its implementation.

In retrospect, I found that although the methodology design helped me answer the research question and fostered reflection and relationship building with the participants, the interview process could have been more efficient and respectful of their time. In my design, I prioritized relationship building over efficiency. The design proved to be challenging in terms of finding time to meet three times with each participant, especially given some participants preferred to meet face-to-face. This resulted in four Sharing Circles instead of one, as originally planned. Alternative future research approaches could entail a
combination of an interview with a questionnaire that would be responded to on one’s own terms entirely.

Participants recounted stories of their lived online learning experiences, which were re-storied and presented as personal portraits, as well as organized into seven themes and concluded with nine design recommendations. The themes revealed that online learning affords a plethora of opportunities, but also presents many unique barriers to the learning experience and success of FNMIO students taking online courses at post-secondary institutions in Canada. The opportunities reveal that distance is not a deficit (Bayne et al., 2020) for FNMIO students and teachers, but they prefer to exercise choice in engaging in various types of synchronous, asynchronous, social, and individual activities. Therefore, fostering students’ autonomy and designing for flexibility are paramount in creating culturally responsive online learning environments. FNMIO students and teachers can benefit from the locational and temporal flexibility of online courses, especially if such courses are designed in decolonizing ways (e.g., Tessaro et al., 2019; Brant, 2013) and appropriately facilitated by culturally knowledgeable and sensitive online teachers. The findings suggest that online course design and teacher training efforts at post-secondary institutions need to be amplified. Such efforts will require relational and reciprocal partnerships with Indigenous groups to ensure that the future directions are relevant, respectful of, and conducive to the needs of Indigenous students and communities. As participants in this inquiry observed, such changes are likely to benefit all online students at post-secondary institutions. As demonstrated, the implications of this study pertain to institutions, departments, online teachers, and educational designers.

Nine tentative design and teaching recommendations generated from this inquiry are:

1. Design for flexibility.
2. Foster learner autonomy.
3. Design for accessibility on various devices and low-bandwidth access.
4. Incorporate experiential learning opportunities.
5. Allow multimodal forms of expression.
6. Include optional opportunities for face-time.
7. Incorporate optional peer learning opportunities.
8. Maintain strong teacher presence.
Since the aim of this qualitative narrative inquiry had not been to claim generalizable outcomes, the stories and recommendations presented in this report are deeply context-based and unique to the seven FNMIO participants who partook in this study. The recommendations reflect an assortment of subjective voices of the seven participants, as Castellano argued, ‘Aboriginal knowledge is rooted in personal experience and lays no claim to universality’ (2000, p. 25).

The design recommendations will need to be implemented in online courses, assessed, and refined through future research studies with FNMIO populations. Future research inquiries could entail cultural localization of the recommendations with specific FNMIO populations and in specific courses. Resulting directly from the literature review, a participatory action research could investigate the effectiveness of establishing teacher presence through multimedia to fill the current gap in FNMIO research. It should be noted that the above are tentative ideas flowing from the findings of this inquiry. Any actual research projects will need to be negotiated and agreed upon with Indigenous partners to ensure that future research is conducted in respectful, relevant, and reciprocal ways (Government of Canada, 2018; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 1991).

To conclude, I am eternally grateful for participants’ willingness to invest their time to entrust their stories with me, and I acknowledge their co-authorship of this work as authors and owners of their stories, and through the participatory approach implemented in this inquiry.
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Appendix A – Invitation and Consent Form

Research Participant Information Package

Witajcie – Boozhoo – Tansi – Han - ʔédlánet’é – Taanshi – Hello

My name is Iwona Gniadek, and I live in Winnipeg. I work as Instructional Designer, and I am a student of the Master of Science in Digital Education online program at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, currently in the dissertation phase. I am a naturalized Canadian, born and raised in Poland. I immigrated to Canada in 2007, and I feel honoured and grateful to have been able to settle on the ancestral lands of Anishinaabeg, Cree, Oji-Cree, Dakota, and Dene Peoples, and the homeland of the Métis Nation.

I would like to invite you to participate in my research study that aims to hear Indigenous students’ and teachers’ stories about their online learning experience at a post-secondary institution. For example, I am curious about how you use various technologies in your studies, what you wish you had known before you decided to study online, what helps you to be at your best in the online environment, and your wishes for the future of online learning. Your stories will help me, and other instructional designers and educators, create better-informed and more enriched online learning experiences for Indigenous students.

Please, review the attached information package about my study. If you wish to participate and/or have any questions about it, please contact me via email at i.gniadek@sms.ed.ac.uk. You can also contact my supervisor Dr. Jeremy Knox by email Jeremy.Knox@ed.ac.uk.

I am looking forward to speaking with you.

Sincerely,

Iwona

My Research Project

My dissertation - Indigenous Perspectives on Learning in the Online Environment – follows Government of Canada’s Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans, 2nd edition (2018) and has been approved by the University of Edinburgh Research Ethics Committee. As I was designing my study, I consulted with Indigenous community members in Manitoba, Canada, to ensure that I follow respectful and ethical protocols, and to discuss potential benefits of my research for the Indigenous students and community in Canada.

What Will Happen
You are invited to join three conversations.

In the spirit of collaborative and ethical research, I will follow-up the conversations to clarify and validate information. You may choose not to participate in a follow-up conversation.

**Your Rights**

You are free to decide if you want to remain anonymous in the study, and you may change your mind on that point at any time. You have the right to omit any section of the interviews. You may withdraw from the study at any point by emailing me at i.gniadek@sms.ed.ac.uk before the results are submitted for publication; your data will be returned to you and deleted from my documentation.

**Risks**

I am not aware of any risks that may exist for you in this study. If you decide that there are, you may skip any section of the study that you feel may pose a risk for you or withdraw from the study completely.
Benefits

One of the primary reasons why I selected this research is reciprocity, that is my desire to give back to the Indigenous community. The report of my findings will set out what I will have learned with you, and from the research analysis. I would like to share these findings openly online to increase exposure to the Indigenous voice on the topic of learning online.

Firstly, I anticipate that my newfound knowledge will influence not only my future learning design practice, but also that of other non-Indigenous and Indigenous learning designers and educators. I am hopeful that the findings will help to enrich the quality of online courses by identifying and addressing the needs and expectations of Indigenous students living in urban and remote communities in Canada.

Secondly, this study may directly benefit you at the time of your involvement. As you share your stories during the Sharing Circle, you will be able to hear similar stories, or stories that offer different approaches and solutions to challenges you have faced or are facing in your online studies. In addition, if you have any questions about online learning that I may help with, do not hesitate to ask. I would be happy to continue our conversations beyond the scope of this project.

Lastly, I acknowledge that this research will benefit me, as I will achieve a Master of Science degree from the University of Edinburgh upon successful completion of this research project.

Compensation

Your participation is voluntary, and you will not be given any money for your participation. However, I will be providing an offering of sema and a small gift in appreciation of your time.

Confidentiality

Access to the raw data from our recorded conversations will only be available to you, to me, and to my dissertation supervisor. Only the de-identified transcripts will be used in the dissertation report; any contextual clues leading to your identity will be removed. I will do that in consultation with you, to avoid any significant changes to your stories. However, you may choose to remain identified by name, in which case you should know that you may change your mind and ask to be anonymized at any point.

If you join the Sharing Circle, your identity will be discovered by the other participants. If you do not wish to be discovered, you should turn down the invitation to join the Sharing Circle. If you would prefer to speak with me individually, please let me know that.

The data I collect will be used for the purposes of my dissertation. All interviews will be recorded and transcribed by me. Your data is your property; therefore, no copies will be retained upon completion of this study.
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<tr>
<th>Statement</th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<tr>
<td>I have read and understand the Participant Information Sheet.</td>
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<td>I have been given the opportunity to ask questions and have them answered to my satisfaction.</td>
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<td>I understand that my participation is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time before Iwona’s dissertation is published without giving a reason.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I understand that I will not be compensated for my participation in the study.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I understand my identity will be known to the researcher (Iwona) and her dissertation supervisor Dr. Jeremy Knox.</td>
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<td>I agree to being audio/video recorded during the interviews for the purposes of transcribing and analysis.</td>
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<td>I understand my personal data will be held securely in an encrypted folder on Iwona’s home computer and backed up in University’s private and secure SharePoint folder. I will have full access to my data throughout the study.</td>
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<td>I understand that the data (interview transcripts) will be anonymized unless I choose to be named in the study.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I would like to be identified by name in the study.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I understand that should I choose to participate in the Sharing Circle, then my identity will be known by all who participate in the Sharing Circle. I may still choose to be anonymous in the research results.</td>
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<tr>
<td>I agree to take part in this project.</td>
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<td>I understand that I will be asked to re-confirm my consent before each stage of the project.</td>
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I freely consent to participating in this study.

Participant’s Name (Printed)………………………………………………………………………

Participant’s Signature …………………………………………………………………………

Date ……………………………………………………………………………………………

Contact Info……………………………………………………………………………………
Appendix B – Interview Schedule

Interview 1: Life Story

1. Tell me about yourself, about your past up to the moment when you began studying online. I’m interested in your learning experiences at home, at work, at school, with peers, in the community.
   a. Where did you go to school?
   b. What were your favourite learning moments? Why? Who was part of it?
2. Have you used technology for personal, academic, and professional purposes prior to studying online? What technologies have you used and how?

Interview 2: Details of Experience

1. How did you become an online learner? What events led to your becoming an online learner?
2. Tell me about the online course you are taking/teaching/took.
3. What’s online learning like for you?
   a. Describe what you do when you study/teach online.
   b. Where are you when you study/teach online? What technology do you use?
   c. What type of internet access do you have/did you have when studying/teaching online?
4. Think back through your online learning/teaching experience. Identify moments that were high points, when you felt most inspired, effective, and engaged as a learner/teacher. Tell me about those moments, how you felt, and what made them possible (What has been the most rewarding part of your online class over the past few weeks?)
   a. When and where the episode took place
   b. Who was involved? E.G. on the discussion forum – what did the instructor do? What did others do?
   c. What happened before, during, and after
   d. How did you feel about what happened?
   e. How did you feel after?
   f. How did it influence your present values and actions?
5. Think back through your online learning/teaching experience. Identify moments that were **low points, when you felt most uninspired, frustrated, and disengaged as a learner/teacher**. Tell me about those moments, how you felt, and what made them possible (What has been the most difficult part of your online class over the past few weeks?)
   a. When and where the episode took place
   b. Who was involved?
   c. What happened before, during, and after
   d. How did you feel about what happened?
   e. How did you feel after?
   f. How did it influence your present values and actions?
   g. Do you have a shared interpretation of the events with other Indigenous students in it or in similar events?

**Interview 3: Sharing Circle**

1. Given your cultural background, what is learning? How does it happen? How do you know you’ve learned? Who’s involved in your learning experience? Is it same or different when you learn online?
2. What do you value most about learning online? What does it mean to you?
3. In the preparation for the circle, you drew an image that shows how you visualise the online learning environment and its relations between humans (peers, instructor, the course, your family, and community), the course content, and technology in the online environment. Feel free to include any other elements that you feel are part of online learning environment or that the online learning environment is part of. Please share it and tell us about it.
4. What aspects of online learning do you find challenging? If you could transform the situation, what would it look like and what would you do?
5. If you had a magic wand, what would be your top three wishes for the future of learning in the online environment for Indigenous students in Canada?
6. What advice about learning online would you give to other Indigenous learners?
7. Is there anything else anyone would like to add? How would you reflect on this Circle experience? Please feel free to contact me if you’d like to share anything after today.
Certificate of Completion

This document certifies that

Iwona Gniadek

has completed the Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans Course on Research Ethics (TCPS 2: CORE)

Date of Issue: 27 July, 2019

Certificate of Completion of TCPS 2: Core
Appendix D - First Nations OCAP Certificate

Certificate of Completion of the Fundamentals of OCAP