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A Principled Uncertainty: Writing Studies Methods in Contexts of Indigeneity

This article uses rhetorical genre theory to discuss methods for writing studies research in light of increasing participation of Indigenous scholars and students in disciplines throughout the academy. Like genres, research methods are embedded in systems of interaction that create subject positions and social relations. Using rhetorical genre theory to understand methods as the cultural tools of research communities, we argue that methods can be enacted as flexible resources in the interest of advancing ethical knowledge. In the context of Indigenous epistemological activism, researchers can then take a contingent stance toward method, a stance we name “principled uncertainty.”

Some of our old people, they were the storytellers in our community and they were also the educators. . . . We think of old people as being our archives, our museum. They were our university. They were the people who were the keepers of everything in our community.

Maria Campbell (qtd. in Gardner)

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Critical challenges to the history of rhetoric have brought with them challenges to the methods with which we study written and spoken texts. Scholars of Indigenous rhetorics question well-trodden methodological paths and invite us to consider how, since Native rhetorical knowledge resides within communities, rhetorical study can be responsive to the values of the communities in which it is undertaken. Researchers discuss how they negotiate their relations to both the Indigenous and research communities with which and from within which they work. Some question the very premises on which alphabetic writing and print have been privileged over alternative literacies, exploring in detail how Indigenous knowledges and alternative textualities—syllabaries, pictographic systems, khipu chords, wampum belts, sandpainting, basket weaving, or pottery design (Boone and Mignolo; Haas; Bross and Wyss; Cushman; Driskill)—find a place in mainstream rhetorical discussion.

The discussion here follows in this effort to place Indigenous perspectives more prominently in rhetorical studies and focuses in particular on how Indigeneity as a critical concept creates methodological concerns for those who research and teach genres of student writing in the academy.¹ Our use of the term *genre* is founded upon the tradition of rhetorical genre scholarship notably advanced by Carolyn R. Miller's 1984 article, and shaped and solidified through the concept of uptake (Freadman; Thieme; Emmons; Reiff and Bawarshi) and the study of activity theory (Russell, "Rethinking"; Spinuzzi). To take such an approach to genre is to say that texts are not objectified as stable forms but rather are contextualized within social communities of practice. Formal elements of texts can be understood only with recourse to the situational contexts in which they are spoken or written—and heard or read—by thinking and feeling members of social groups with collective memories and habituated practices.

Genre theorists who study questions of diversity in academic writing describe genres as flexible resources (Devitt) and "dynamic rhetorical forms" (Berkenkotter and Huckin) that respond to sociopolitical and other changes in rhetorical situations. We argue that so, too, are methods and their descriptions. Given the questions that scholars of Indigenous rhetorics pose, it is necessary to explore how the very methods of writing studies are challenged by Indigenous rhetorics, protocols, and epistemologies. Thus, while scholars have begun to weigh in on how Indigeneity and Indigenous

rhetorics might inform our teaching and research (Villanueva, “Maybe”; Jarratt; Lyons, “Rhetorical”; King, Gubele, and Anderson), scholarship has yet to reflect, as we do below, on how writing studies methods themselves respond rhetorically to such situations.

This article investigates our process of developing a method for a study of writing in Indigenous studies courses in light of the role of power in reproducing established methods. The data for this project consist of instructors’ reflections, solicited in discourse-based interviews, on changes they made to pedagogical genres as a response to their own decolonization efforts or to institutional mandates for Indigenization. We present this data to illustrate the tensions in our project between established methods in the field of writing studies and critical questions raised in discussions on Indigenous methodology. We argue that method choices and descriptions bear some similarity to genre choices, particularly in the way that genre has been theorized in rhetorical studies as part of recurring patterns of activity. It is useful to think about these similarities between method descriptions and rhetorical analyses of genre because they allow us to see method’s role in the reproduction of existing activity systems and existing power relations.

Method References and Genre Theory

At the heart of critical questions on a method’s transparency and reproducibility are concerns about what it is that is being reproduced if research follows the path of established forms of inquiry. More pertinently, as researchers continue to use the research methods of a largely patriarchal and colonial academy, to what degree are they reproducing the system itself (Smith)?²

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When scholars adhere to established beliefs that declare certain source materials as more reliable than others and certain forms of analysis as more rigorous than others, they can also be perpetuating the blind spots of a hierarchical and iniquitous academic system. However, while there is situated association between accepted research methods and unjust academic structures, there is not a direct bond between them. It is not possible to say, for instance, that working quantitatively with government documents has intrinsically less potential to advance the causes of decolonization than does listening to orally

recounted stories that describe experiences of marginalization. In other words, the question of what it is that is being reproduced by reproducing established, dominant methods is not fully reducible to the power structures within which these methods have been developed. But it is also true that unquestioned reproduction of established methods too easily serves the systems of power that are already in place and that the social relations created by dominant methods are marked by differences in social power.

In order to understand better in what way choices of methods are linked to systems of activity and the workings of power within them, it is useful to consider the ways in which references to method function in much the same way as genre names do. Genre theorists like Miller and John M. Swales have pinpointed genre names as a key resource in understanding how genres are used, thus inviting ethnomethodological analyses of how genres function among their users. In the context of newly enabling technologies, Laurie McNeill argues that “a great deal is attached to . . . generic labels, perhaps more so than generic practices” in that genre labels can signal allegiance to either a sense of stability or of change (146). References to methods are a shorthand that is similarly indicative of community practices and allegiances. Like genre names, method references focus on central but isolated aspects of a process that

involves rich and varying sets of steps and interactions. These shorthands can create a sense of stability and naturalization. Sue Clegg and Jacqueline Stevenson highlight

the “insider knowledge” that is at play when method shorthands are used, noting how the short phrases that describe method hide “contextually dense webs of meaning making” (6).³ Clegg and Stevenson criticize the use of these oft-repeated phrases because they are “too thin” and fail to bring a discipline’s “common-sense knowing” under “systematic scrutiny” (6).⁴ Shorthands allow for recognition among those who believe they know what the terms stand for. They create degrees of exclusion for those who do not. We suggest that, like genre names, method names also hide assumptions about their users’ shared, recurring goals and exigences (Miller), which are in turn associated with particular practices and forms of interaction. In other words, particular methods are situated within goal-oriented networked activities and thus deserve to be read rhetorically.

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Importantly for the current discussion, research methods create subject positions and shape social relations, most obviously between researchers and research participants, but also between researchers and research assistants, staff members, review board members, colleagues inside and outside the discipline, and public readers of scholarly work. Methods and references to them are forms of shared cognition that grow from “people’s joint activity with shared tools” and are thus “co-constructed and distributed” forms of activity (Russell and Yañez 337). In that way, method references are markers of the collective activity through which participants “are always in contact with the history, values, and social relations of a community—or among communities” (338).

Methods as the cultural tools of particular research communities therefore do their part in representing these communities’ histories and values. To the extent that method descriptions are abbreviated in the processes of inducting participants into a project and presenting the project to colleagues, this history and these values are embedded and implied rather than spoken about. They can become more explicit when some methods are introduced as new to the field or to new practitioners, or when older or newer methods are elaborately discussed under new critical paradigms. But in most written or spoken conversations about method, researchers rely on the ease of the shorthand, leave out the details, and assume underlying histories and values to be shared.

We are aware that a discussion about methods cannot happen without considering methodology more broadly. Methodology is a concept that collects single methods into a more systematic consideration of method as part of the history and core beliefs of a discipline. In that sense, the term *methodology* connects methods to larger questions of disciplinary epistemologies; to use Gesa Kirsch and Patricia A. Sullivan’s wording, “methods and methodology—the pragmatics and problematics of knowledge making—are intertwined” (2). Perhaps it is for this reason that the two terms are more likely used interchangeably, especially when researchers describe and write about their particular research projects. This frequent conflation further supports our observations on method terms as shorthand: while undoubtedly tied to a rich context of key values and practices in a research community, references to method often obscure the complexity of this

context. Just as academic genres are embedded in disciplinary epistemologies, so too are methods.

Like questions about a genre's fit to a situation (Bitzer), decisions about a method's (or methodology's) appropriateness for a research project are part of particular historical and cultural situations within activity systems and the social and material patterns of interaction within these systems. In other words, researchers make method choices by considering how a method is valued in their research community; they think about which technological and financial resources they have at their disposal as well as what the personal and professional contacts are on which they need to rely; they ponder the ethical and disciplinary requirements for their research and whether their method choice would satisfy various levels of review and research assessment. In these various moments of thinking through a research project, some method choices will appear as more felicitous than others (to use the language of speech act theory) depending on how well a method represents the shared values and assumptions of those who are interacting through it. Thus, the appropriateness of a method will most likely come under question when a project is being discussed across different types of discourse, different disciplinary fields, different communities.

Felicitous conditions for methods in Indigenous studies have changed due to collective efforts to establish new values within the research community of Indigenous studies scholars. This effort is being applied to all levels of academic work in Indigenous studies as more scholars are able to train novice researchers in Indigenous ways of thinking about method. Critiques advanced by theorists in Indigenous methodologies have been translated into various research paradigms (e.g., Smith 143–64), which in turn has led to adjustments in the criteria by which this research is assessed, for instance, in processes of hiring and promotion and publishing and reviewing. As a result of these efforts, new shorthands have entered our conversations about method, shorthands that are taken to better express the research values of Indigenous studies and in some ways contrast to the values in other fields. These new terms include *community-based* or *tribal-centered research*, *collaborative participatory research* (Cochran et al.; Castleden, Garvin, and Huu-ay-aht First Nation), *storytelling* or “storywork” (Archibald), “yarning” (Bessarab and Ng'andu), or *conversational method* (Kovach, “Conversational”).

A word of caution is in order: to list method names as we do above is

to suggest a stability, a shared knowledge, a recognizable form that does not truly exist. Like genres, methods are pragmatic but shifting concepts whose sense of stability is produced (but not guaranteed) through recurrence, repetition, and uptake. The instability in shared knowledge about method becomes particularly clear at intersections between different fields of study.

We offer a corrective to an abstracted understanding of method-as-form, a corrective that brings to the fore the social and cognitive interests of both researchers and research participants.

In the following section we tell the story of how we, beginning from the perspective of writing studies, conceived of our project in the terms of genre studies methodology and then came to re-evaluate these conceptions in light of Indigenous methodologies.

One aim is to seek out the ways in which

research in writing studies has been implicated in the processes and histories of colonization, including through its use of concepts, materials, and methods. We offer a corrective to an abstracted understanding of method-as-form, a corrective that brings to the fore the social and cognitive interests of both researchers and research participants. Rather than objective and autonomous, method is situated, interpellative, and dialogic—important considerations in academic contexts where insider knowledge and a feel for the game shape interactions with research participants who are outsiders to the discipline (van Enk; Clegg and Stevenson), and where potentially incommensurable epistemological frameworks come into contact with each other. Only when we acknowledge methods as situated and dialogic, as co-constructed among participants and researchers, can we successfully challenge their alignment with oppressive power structures. In reference to Shawn Wilson's work, we call the stance from which such challenges can be mounted a position of principled uncertainty.

Method: Take One

We are two non-Indigenous scholars who have worked at institutions whose administrations have in recent years made focused efforts to increase the presence of Indigenous students and Indigenous studies. These efforts have resulted in an education program for Native teachers, the building of culturally appropriate spaces to act as an academic home for Indigenous students, an increase in Indigenous faculty, and the availability of support and resources for faculty who incorporate Indigenous content, issues, and materials into their teaching. Some of these resources have taken the

form of discussions about how to bring Indigenous material into a variety of courses, how both students and instructors can best learn about and respect Indigenous cultures, and how instructors might prepare for the tense and painful moments that many participants report when discussing Indigenous histories in the classroom. These kinds of teaching-focused interventions tend to aim in part at changing curriculum and in part at managing classroom atmosphere. Underlying these practical concerns are deeper-seated questions about how to address the colonial legacy of the Western university system through the Indigenization of academic work, questions that call for a more radical rethinking of all levels of education.

As we participated in a number of events, workshops, and talks related to these issues, we noticed that while certain topics were of recurring and serious concern to instructors, student writing did not seem to be one of them. Much productive thinking and talking happened on issues such as how to ensure that non-Indigenous students have a basic knowledge of Indigenous histories before they participate in classroom discussion, how to place texts and lectures about Indigenous issues in the context of an otherwise non-Indigenous course, and how to protect Native students from the emotional burden of ignorant and racist commentary (Perreault and Crey). Given the role that student writing plays in many other cross-disciplinary discussions about university teaching, we noted how absent it was from these discussions about teaching Native studies. What is happening with student writing in courses with Indigenous content, we wondered. **If instructors are in the process of rethinking so many elements of their teaching when incorporating Indigenous studies into their courses, are they not also rethinking the role and nature of written assignments in these courses?**

On the basis of these research questions, we first conceived of our study in the methodological terms that we know best, those of qualitative investigations in the realms of genre and discourse analysis. Since we want to know how instructors think about student writing in courses with Indigenous content, we are interviewing them. In order to recruit participants for our project, we found out which courses from the various humanities and social science disciplines are cross-listed with Native studies programs. In

addition, it was important to us that our method for contacting potential participants did not exclude instructors of less established status, that it contained names of contract faculty (who could also be graduate students) side by side with tenured and tenure-track instructors.

Since we wanted to capture a wide range of responses but also compare them across the diversity of courses and disciplines, we conducted the interviews in a semi-structured way, using a discourse-based technique (Odell, Goswami, and Herrington). At the beginning of each ninety-minute interview, we initiated a conversation based on a reading of the syllabus and handouts that the instructor used in one of his or her courses. Although our interviews do not take the form of systematically working through a set of questions, we brought a list of central discussion topics to the interview so that we could check against it toward the end of the conversation.⁵ Our main interest in these discussions is how the genres of student writing might or might not be inflected by the instructor's thinking about Indigenizing the practice of teaching. Are classroom genres changing as a result of focused attention on Indigenous studies and Indigenous epistemologies? Given the prominence that feelings and experiences of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students have in discussions among instructors, does the presence of these feelings and experiences play a role in the way writing assignments are devised?

Published reflections on the classroom learning of Indigenous students (Dyc; Walsh-Bowers and Johnson) and on instructors' experiences in classes on Indigenous studies (Kelly, "You"; Kelly, "Gasps"; McNally; Cole) provide some indication of the variety of conditions that shape assignments in such courses. Other studies explore how traditional rhetoric can constrain classroom teaching and undermine alternative knowledge-making paradigms (Villanueva, "Rhetoric"). Daniel Cole, for example, highlights the tension between his aim of showing Western rhetoric "not as a foundation for the course, but instead as a character in a drama of oppression and resistance" (123) and the fact that the key writing goal—to "discern rhetorical strategies through lucid expository prose" (135)—is Western through and through. For teachers trained in the tradition of rhetoric and composition, the phrases *rhetorical strategies* and *expository prose* evoke a long and Eurocentric history of writing instruction. Phrases like these bring forward the presence of institutional and disciplinary practices in

how writing assignments are designed and delivered even in courses that in some way resist those practices.

Like these teachers' critical pedagogy, we wanted our project to respond to broad critiques of Western university teaching (Spivak and Harasym; Kuokkanen) by laying out the detailed work of specific courses. However, we designed our project to consider more than the practice of just one teacher or just one type of course, hoping to provide a richer picture of both the sense of possibility as well as the variety of constraints that guide these instructors' decisions. Given that rhetorical genre theory is our methodological lens, we were interested in the contexts in which handouts and assignments are produced, as well as in the social actions that are performed by these prompts and the student writing that responds to them. Furthermore, along with other genre theorists and writing scholars, we know how tacitly genres work, how implicit the motivations, features, and actions of genres are. They are often so implicit that those tasked with teaching these genres are frequently at a loss to explain what it is that makes them look and function the way they do (Giltrow and Valiquette; Russell, *Writing*; Stockton). The method of discourse-based interviews promised to uncover both what instructors explicitly say about writing assignments in the classroom and what they implicitly think when they put together their syllabi, explain assignments in class, and assess students' work.

All these methodological decisions are well-approved ones within the field of writing studies. We gained ethics approval based on a description of these choices of method; we have delivered several papers based on our findings at conferences for applied literature, rhetoric and composition, and discourse and writing studies; we have been told by our colleagues in writing studies how useful they think this project is. In that sense, our method was well recognized and entirely uncontroversial within the realm of studies of written communication. But since this project is about writing in Indigenous studies courses and about the Indigenization of academic work, we realized there is also another story to tell about method. Since we are so interested in how instruction in student writing might respond to questions of Indigenization, we also have to ask how our own method of investigation functions in these terms: what is it possible for us—as non-Indigenous scholars of writing—to find out and to say about the Indigenization of academic research and writing?

An Intermission

Non-Indigenous scholars and researchers like us are for the most part coming to know Indigenous epistemologies by reading scholarly publications, observing and listening to Indigenous colleagues and friends, and attending conferences and gatherings. Recent years have seen a variety of studies that thoroughly call to task past ideas about Indigenous writing, positing historical examples of alphabetic writing by Native Americans in order to revise views that have exclusively emphasized Western influence on Indigenous genres. These studies show that alphabetic writing reveals as much about Indigenous worldviews and writing as a tool for Indigenous purposes as it does about missionary and settler control of print discourses (Wyss; Konkle; Fee). Abenaki researcher Lisa Brooks finds historical examples of Indigenous writing that have not been fully understood mainly because previous scholarship has tended to work so exclusively with European perspectives on written genres. She thoroughly repositions our lens on these texts and demonstrates how Native space transformed European writing by incorporating it into its own traditions and geographic, political, and social networks (for similar approaches see also Cohen; Round).

The uses of written genres for rhetorical purposes such as political negotiation, legal argumentation, and cultural preservation have their own histories within Indigenous communities. Various situated and storied as writing practices are, the task, therefore, is not to isolate specific types of writing and label them as expressions of Indigenous ways of thinking. Rather, the task is to study how genres are enacted in situations where Indigenous and colonial systems of activity interact, and thus to understand how written genres are able to serve differing interests. Thus, our research project is not searching to identify formal characteristics of particularly “Indigenous” types of student writing assignments. Instead, we want to understand in as rich as possible a way what the rhetorical situation might be from the perspective of its participants, including both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and teachers. This approach turns its attention away from exclusive focus on the text and toward the text within not only its immediate rhetorical situation but also the wider context of a politics of Indigeneity.

The task is to study how genres are enacted in situations where Indigenous and colonial systems of activity interact, and thus to understand how written genres are able to serve differing interests.

Such a broadening of attention does not only apply to studying the above-mentioned historical situations in which Native people have textually interacted with settler society; it is also not limited to teaching in classrooms in which Indigenous students are noticeably present.⁶ Instead, this genre-critical attention pertains to all the work we do in classrooms and researchers' offices in universities across North America, many of which are located on Indigenous peoples' lands. As Sami scholar Rauna Johanna Kuokkanen notes:

Without waiting to be invited, Indigenous epistemes are already "in" the academy. The problem is not how to bring Indigenous knowledge to the university, since it is already there. The problem is the epistemic ignorance that prevails because the gift of Indigenous epistemes remains impossible in the academy. (108)

This awareness raises the question: how can research in written communication honor the presence of Indigenous peoples and their epistemes?⁷ Another way of phrasing that task is to express a need to decolonize the study and teaching of written communication.

While several scholars have produced remarkable work that challenges an exclusively Eurocentric conception of North American rhetorical tradition (Lyons, "Rhetorical"; Lyons, *X-Marks*; Powell, "Rhetorics"; Powell, "Down"; Enoch, "Resisting"; Enoch, *Refiguring*; Haas; Baca; Villaneuva, "Rhetoric"), the recognition of this work remains largely confined to the subfield of Native American rhetorical studies. A collective effort is therefore needed to address how the history of colonization and continuing practices of control and oppression of Native peoples relate to writing studies. Heeding Kuokkanen's call for hospitality, we should position questions about Indigenous research and writing more centrally in our scholarship and teaching: Indigenous hospitality premises the work that we do on First Nations and Native American traditional territories. For that reason, we must resist subsuming Indigenous writing under the umbrellas of multiculturalism, diversity, critical race theory, and cross-cultural or contrastive rhetoric.⁸ Given our collective occupancy of Native lands, questions about the revitalization of Indigenous languages, community practices, and relations to land are of a different order than questions about classroom diversity and comparative communication.

Method: Take Two**How do the considerations of Indigenous hospitality and the presence of Indigenous epistemologies inflect the development of research methods in written communication?**

If we challenge the practices of rhetoric and writing studies from the perspective of Indigenous history, what does this challenge mean for the methods of studies like ours? How do the considerations of Indigenous hospitality and the presence of Indigenous epistemologies inflect the development of research methods in written communication? How would questions of Indigenous hospitality apply to choices about method? We spend the remainder of this article discussing the tensions between various positions on Indigenous and writing studies methods through a consideration of data collected via discourse-based interviews. We have analyzed our 36,000 words of interview transcripts for evidence of this tension.

In the data-gathering part of this project we took a detailed inventory of the kinds of decisions instructors make about student writing in their Indigenous studies courses. We inquired into how ideas about Indigenization—be they grounded in the instructor’s direct engagement with the field of Native studies, the instructor’s sense of care for Indigenous and other students in the classroom, or the university’s or department’s policies and procedures—play into these decisions. We wished to understand what our interview subjects thought about the tasks and the possibilities of Indigenizing university teaching in the wider sense, and what effect that thinking has on the ways in which students are asked to produce written material and are being assessed on the basis of that writing.

Instructors have widely varying views on what Indigenization can and should mean in their classrooms. Rather than reflect on writing assignments in response to our question “Have you ever shaped your assignments for the purposes of Indigenization?” some took the opportunity to reflect on what our question actually presupposed, that is, the “fact” of Indigenization itself. Indeed, there was discomfort with Indigenization as an abstract mandate, even while committing wholeheartedly to on-the-ground practices that support Indigenous students and topics in the classroom. As one interviewee stated:

In a settler context, [to] say, well actually what we’re going to be doing is Indigenizing. What does that mean? Is it a metaphor? . . . I can’t commit to metaphorical Indigenizing.

Another interviewee noted:

I don't go along with the Indigenizing concept. I think university is university; the professional world is the professional world, and those standards need to be met. . . . When we start talking about Indigenizing things I tend to see that as a way to water it down, and so I tend to go the other way. However, that sounds overly harsh, so let me clarify that a little bit, because my entire approach to teaching is mutual respect—it's infused with Indigenous values.

Abstract mandates and practices on the ground are not always in harmony with each other. The broadly phrased claims of the university administration can meet many types of resistance. In the cases of these two instructors, this is not resistance to Indigenization *per se* but rather resistance to an abstracted version of it. In place of it, these instructors favor particularized and situated expressions of Indigeneity that are attuned to the community practices of those involved.

Given the hundreds of nations and groups in the Americas, it is no wonder there is discomfort with Indigenization as an abstract concept. Walter D. Mignolo notes that decolonization itself has been theorized in a "colonial matrix of power" (455). Given that this matrix structures the academy, how can we as researchers begin to ask how Indigenous epistemologies might come to shape the genres of student writing? With such foundational questions about Indigenization as a concept, it would be illogical to interpret any of our data as evidence of Indigenization. At the most, we will find potential beginnings of what Mignolo (drawing from Amin) calls *de-linking*: the process of profound epistemic decolonization.⁹ Indeed, one respondent provided a strategy for such *de-linking*. In answer to our question about Indigenization, the interviewee replied: "I introduce Indigenous literary nationalism. . . . The key thing I like is simply saying the ideas of an individual nation are . . . legitimate, so that you can use them as a critical lens."

Sometimes the very asking of a question prompted interviewees to consider specific elements of their writing assignments in light of Indigenization, and they often did so in ways that invited dialogue. One interviewee responded to our question about whether First Nations students are encouraged to draw on their experiences or to write more personally in their assignments:

I do [introduce] the whole idea of positioning yourself . . . in relation to the text you're discussing, which is pretty standard in—is it standard in English? I don't know what's standard anymore.

In this response, the instructor was interpreting past teaching with the help of the categories our question provided, trying to find evidence about personal writing. The instructor attempted to locate the positioning that is encouraged in the course: is it a practice that's still standard in the discipline of English, or is it more exclusively a feature of Indigenous studies?

Our method of discourse-based interviews aimed to exploit such moments of uncertainty in order to access tacit knowledge that undergirds decisions writers make in their routine writing practices. The method was designed to interrupt what Anthony Giddens calls the discursive consciousness, habituated practices of talking about what we do, in order to get at the overlooked operations of the practical consciousness, which are routinized and seldom articulated explicitly (Giddens). As a method, discourse-based interviews are similar to the type of narrative analysis that pays attention to hesitations and silences, where interviewees confront or struggle with competing or shifting frameworks and ideologies. Norman Fairclough calls these moments of hesitation “disfluencies” and notes that attending to them—in our case through pointed questions at opportune times as faculty read out their syllabi—can “make visible aspects of practices which might normally be naturalized, and therefore difficult to notice” (Fairclough 230). Our method, however, was explicitly challenged by one of our interviewees, who, at the end of the interview, when we took time to debrief our method of discourse-based interviews, quipped with some humor, “everything about me is rehearsed.” Clegg and Stevenson note that the interview as a method in higher education is overly “normalized” as producing neutral data, even in contexts such as ours where reflexivity is invited. In an academic setting, they state, both interviewer and interviewee have a “feel for the game” (6), and this aspect gets lost in “the ghostly presence of positivist assumptions that appear to haunt the ways we write our methods/methodology when reporting research” (9).

Our interviewees' attitudes toward what Indigenization meant in their courses was also inflected by the position that their courses occupied in the programs in which they taught. For instance, one of the instructors taught in a highly coveted social science program: entry into the program

was competitive, and jobs secured after graduation promised prestigious careers. Compared to similar programs at other universities, the instructor described this one as a bit more “creative,” less conventional. Given the marketplace the students enter, however, the instructor nevertheless focused on teaching expected skills: “I insist on meeting criteria of the mainstream society. . . . I create a very high-powered environment in my classrooms . . . with high expectations.” In the context of this program, the space created for Indigenous values was not in the realm of genres of assignments or forms of assessment, but rather in the realm of “who I am and how I teach” when the instructor invited different views and was “very accommodating of a variety of perspectives.”

Another instructor was very differently positioned in a humanities program with dwindling enrolment numbers and no firm job prospects for its graduating students; yet, this was also a program that had more than one specialist in Indigenous studies. Under these conditions, the instructor was comfortable positioning the course and its assignments outside the mainstream of the discipline. Conventional expectations were not something that had to be strictly met by either the instructor or the students; the goal of this instructor’s teaching was to support Indigenous students as best as possible, especially if they struggled generally with academic work or more particularly with the work of the discipline. For that reason, this instructor had “flexible deadlines,” moved from “a really directed assignment at the beginning” to an annotated bibliography to the more open final paper. The instructor stressed the importance of how the assignment sequence worked as a “check-in” for nontraditional students particularly because “it frustrates me that, typically, sort of conventionally prepared students will do the best.” Remembering a particular First Nations student, the instructor said: “she had the capacity but maybe not the training . . . and so it frustrated me because . . . how radical can you be if you just keep replicating the same people who go to grad school”?

The difference between these two examples lies not only in how one instructor did not see Indigenization as related to the design of writing assignments and the other did, but also in how their thinking about writing related to their knowledge of our disciplinary perspective as writing studies scholars. Clegg and Stevenson describe how research in higher education can function as “a form of covert academic development,” which for them reflects their own “reformist tendencies” (14). When instructors in their

study were interviewed, it became apparent that the process and content of the interview itself led them to reflect on their practice and make adjustments to that practice. The reformist intent of some of our questions placed us in a complicated relationship to our research participants: at one level we were exploring and assessing their individual practices from a writing studies perspective, at another level we were analyzing the influence of the broader policies that informed these practices, and at a further level we were trying to help Indigenous students have a more secure footing in their courses. Our interview partners will have had their own perception about what our goals were in the interview process. In these interviews, our own place is anything but neutral or transparent. It seems that a full acknowledgment of the ways in which interviews in higher education are inescapably situated can, rather than compromise neutrality, actually produce more ethically accountable results.

There are other examples in our transcript data where our writing expertise was brought more clearly into the conversation. For instance, in a moment when one of us asked, “Have you considered showing examples of real-life briefings and memos?”—thereby displaying our writing studies penchant for providing genre examples to students who are asked to produce these genres—the interviewee replied:

I have and I should do more of that because . . . especially the last couple of weeks they struggle with how to write this.

In another moment one of us noticed that a variety of genre names were used for the same assignment: “You call them essay considerations, but I get the sense that you’re not thinking of them as essays perhaps,” and the interviewee responded:

As essays, no, no, no, not entirely. Yeah. That’s probably confusing. But then again this is just a standard ... verbiage that I use in all syllabi.

These moments were not particularly frequent—mostly our identities and ideas as writing studies scholars remained unaddressed—but they occurred because we struggled overall to maintain a focus in the interviews on the

genres of student writing. For our interviewees, it seemed, the contingencies of broader contexts—Indigenization as a concept, disciplinary politics, student retention—seemed to make writing too mundane, too stabilized to question. But with a little prodding, we learned something relevant, something about the routinized aspects of classroom genres. Such revelations were hard won.

These moments also raise the specter of writing instruction's association with corrective practices: when we veered into our area of expertise, did our interviewees think that we were trying to correct their pedagogy? A key point this article makes is that while methods are richly situated in the process of research, that richness is rarely represented in publications, and neither is the way in which researchers repeatedly step outside their scripts (van Enk). The above-cited moments where interviewees take opportunities to critically reflect on their positions in relation to the presupposed elements of our questions, or to anticipate any other-than-neutral stances of us as interviewers, must be read as a function of a broader understanding of method as socio-rhetorically situated action. Focusing on Mikhail Bakhtin's notion of the dialogic nature of speech, Anneke A. J. van Enk reminds us that such reactions have to be viewed not as an unadulterated expression of the participant's thoughts but as "jointly produced" between interviewee and interviewer (1268). Given the highly political nature of questions of Indigenization—and given the politics of writing itself, for that matter—it is very apparent how we, the interviewers, are co-constructing meanings with our interviewees in the process of the interview. Our relationship to our participants is located firmly within the culture of the academy (interviewees and interviewers are academics within the social sciences and humanities).

In the interest of rigor and neutrality, the way we introduced our study very much foregrounded writing studies as our discipline and thus created a sense of disciplinary difference that begged to be used as a foundational element of our interview relationship. This also means that although not overly formal, the way in which we contacted and met our interviewees bore none of the marks of Indigenous protocols that, for instance, Cree scholar Laara Fitznor employs when she prepares food and offers tobacco at each

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interview (qtd. in Kovach, *Indigenous* 138). In addition, Fitznor shapes her research method by what is revealed to her through intuitions, dreams, and energy (140). Although they are essential to her work and her relations with her interviewees, she might not mention any of these elements in her published work.

It is these often unpublished elements of a research story that make the difference between a Western qualitative method and an Indigenous one, argues Kovach. Taking stock of the differences between Indigenous conversations and Western interviews, Kovach provides the following description: an Indigenous conversational method is linked to a particular tribal epistemology; it is relational and purposeful; it follows particular protocols as determined by epistemology or place; it is informal and flexible, collaborative and dialogic (43). Following these guidelines, it would be an egregious misrepresentation to call our method Indigenous. At the most basic level, we lack grounding in Indigenous epistemologies and protocols. Thus, the method/methodology of this project is perhaps best situated within the field of qualitative methods that are useful to both Indigenous and non-Indigenous readers, although from the perspective of Archibald and Kovach they cannot be assumed to overlap with Indigenous methods.

The larger aim of our project is to understand how to secure both academic hospitality for Indigenous students and critical awareness among non-Indigenous ones, and to see how practices of writing are positioned in that task. It is to this larger end that we designed this study, hoping that our results will inform an understanding of how the genres of student writing are being shaped by sociopolitical forces. It is also to this larger end that the tensions inherent in our method are a useful subject for critical reflection.

Recent discussions on the standard methodological procedures for qualitative research—those often chaperoned by institutional ethics review boards—focus on the ethical relationships in research practices. Anonymity, for example, is no longer posited as an intrinsic value, and examples are offered about how it can sometimes act to compromise Indigenous communities' sovereignty over their cultural property (for a useful summary see Svalastog and Eriksson). Our interviewees, however, felt more at liberty to speak under conditions of anonymity, making comments about speaking off the record, or quipping, seemingly in jest, "This is all anonymous, right?" While Indigenous perspectives on method might invite non-Indigenous scholars to cocreate an ethical space for collaboration and inquiry (Uhlik)

and embrace the stance of “ally” (Regan; Alfred and Corntassel; Barker), the double obligation toward Indigenous and Western epistemologies creates an inability to work toward—even a necessary avoidance of—a formal articulation of an abstracted, reproducible, or replicable method. For instance, Mary Hermes describes the methods of her three-year study of schooling on an Ojibwe reservation as necessarily diffuse and contingent. She says they “refuse a single category or any other formula that may make them a recipe for research” (155). For her, there are no prescriptive ways for doing research in Native communities; each project will have to find its own “situated response,” grounded in both community and academic concerns.

Patricia A. Sullivan and James E. Porter also call for a situated approach to method.¹⁰ In writing this article we could not ignore and did not want to disguise the ways in which our research was shaped by unforeseen contingencies in the rhetorical situation. As Sullivan and Porter write: “researchers who do not acknowledge the impact of the situation and who do not use the heuristic quality of method to aid them in dealing with shifts over time run the risk of writing research reports that reaffirm the social norms of methodology, even when their own methods deviate from those norms in reasonable, defensible, even laudable ways” (253). Their argument for method as both heuristic and praxis takes us partway to an ethics for writing researchers in the context of decolonization; what we add through a genre lens is an empirical yet flexible basis for doing research in the vicinity of Indigenous peoples and their ways of knowing, a method that alerts us to the epistemological assumptions of our discipline.

This leads us back to recent work in rhetorical genre scholarship, which interrogates form in a way that we think can apply to questions of method, asking just what the repetition and reproducibility of formal features of genres mean. Genres are as much sites of difference as they are sites of stability (Giltrow, “Genre”), and similar forms can give rise to widely divergent uptakes (Makmillen). In other words, uptake contains flexibility and can unsettle predictable relationships between genres and, more interestingly, can shape unexpected social actions from within a network of heterogeneous possibilities (Freadman; Thieme). As writing studies scholars and teachers, we have an obligation to explore the questions our study asks, but

Double obligation toward Indigenous and Western epistemologies creates an inability to work toward—even a necessary avoidance of—a formal articulation of an abstracted, reproducible, or replicable method.

to do so in ways that leave room for epistemological incommensurability. What we can do as non-Indigenous scholars in the field, then, is maintain a principled uncertainty. Shurli Makmillen argues that in contact zones of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relations, we cannot base a genre claim on what Miller describes as “shared recognition” (100). We are arguing similarly that in research on how traditional genres of the academy are being shaped by Indigenous ways of knowing, we cannot fully predict or even ascertain the social action of our methods.

Thus, in the context of discussions about method—which in essence focus on reproducible forms of inquiry—we want to highlight that a flexible opportunism can be a principled response to the study of written genres in the changing political landscape of the university, where Indigenous

Rhetorical genre theory allows us to lose sight of form for long enough to explore and do justice to the contingencies of situation.

protocols challenge the standard genres of academic research and the violence of detribalization and deterritorialization. In our efforts to explore how student genres are affected by moves to Indigenize the academy, and to explore this through university meta-genres (Giltrow, “Meta-Genre”), we discovered something about method. The more we thought through the concept of “principled uncertainty” (Wilson) as applied to questions of method, the closer we came to an understanding of method as functioning akin to how genre functions. As illustrated above, we think rhetorical genre theory allows us to lose sight of form for long enough to explore and do justice to the contingencies of situation.

We are not the first to pause in the middle of a research project in order to, as Kakali Bhattacharya puts it, “reevaluate some of [our] crucial ideological assumptions in terms of academic rigour and trustworthiness” (1105). We are in good company as we interrupt the planned flow of our research process to write through the topic of method (Bhattacharya; Clegg and Stevenson; van Enk). A conception of method as akin to genre renders adjustments to method a more taken-for-granted assumption in writing studies. Methods need to be flexible resources mobilized in the interest of advancing ethical knowledge (that are based in theory *and* experience). It has taken a few unexpected turns in the research process, an ongoing reflection on Indigenous ways of knowing, and the incontrovertible fact of our presence on unceded Indigenous territory to drive this point home to us.

Appendix: Interview Discussion Topics

Keywords

Do writing assignments respond to emotional difficulty or tension related to material and class discussion?

Are students harnessing personal feelings, interests, knowledges for their academic work?

What decisions do you make when designing assignments for courses with Aboriginal content?

Research Questions

In what relation do assignments stand to the subject of the course?

Do they differ from assignments in other courses?

Are First Nations students encouraged to draw on their experiences? How so?

Questions We Must Ask

What do you say about your assignments in the classroom? What do you say when instructing students about them?

How do you see the relationship between your own writing and the writing your students do?

Have you ever shaped your assignments for the purposes of Indigenization?

Is there anything you're noticing in how students write in response to these assignments?

Questions We May Ask

Can you explain how you came to teach courses on Aboriginal issues?

Have you ever changed your assignments as a result of conflict or tension experienced in past courses?

Do the writing assignments in this course differ from writing assignments in other courses you teach?

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Notes

1. Roger Maaka and Augie Fleras use the term *Indigeneity* to mean a “politicized ideology for challenge, resistance, and transformation” (14).
2. Linda Tuhiwai Smith reminds us that in an Indigenous context, the pursuit of knowledge cannot be disinterested, and methodological concerns are never apolitical: “methodological debates are ones concerned with the broader politics and strategic goals of indigenous research. It is at this level that researchers have to clarify and justify their intentions” (239).
3. Similarly, Theresa Lillis notes that even context-sensitive methodologies, like ethnography, are reduced to “an array of oblique glosses” such as “case study” and “qualitative” when described in academic publications (381).
4. Clegg and Stevenson mention that current standards of research productivity and their emphasis on journal articles result in the pressure to write succinct pieces that conform to 6,000- to 8,000-word-length articles as a factor in the shortening of method descriptions.
5. The note sheet we take to each interview is shown in the Appendix.
6. Our critique of Daniel Cole’s project of teaching composition through Native historical writing would be that as the teacher of that class he seemed to operate too securely under the assumption that there were no Indigenous students present. This assumption likely fostered a sense among non-Indigenous students that they were among themselves and did not have to consider an Indigenous audience hearing or overhearing their words. How might his efforts to “try to allow adequate space both in class discussion and in formal and informal writing for student resistance to and skepticism about Native points of view” have shifted if there had not been that assumption (126)? See also Qwo-Li Driskill, who pinpoints the “assumption about Native absence in the classroom” that makes instructors “mis-see” Native students (64).
7. Not to be confused with epistemology, or simply worldview, an episteme is “the taken-for-granted ground whose unwritten rules are learned (or as Foucault would say, ‘written’ in the social order) through the processes of socialization into a particular culture” (Kuokkanen 57). That this ignorance is perpetuated, even in scholarship, is, according to Aileen Moreton-Robinson, the result of the “historical amnesia” about white dispossession of Indigenous lands (93).
8. Several scholars critique the tendency to place Native writing under the categories of diversity and multiculturalism. See, for instance, Villanueva (“Maybe”); Konkle (27); and Baca (2009).
9. We thank our anonymous reviewer for pointing out this possibility.

10. Sullivan and Porter apply their argument for “methodology as heuristic”—in other words, as emergent from situation—to workplace writing situations, which we consider in keeping with this context, in which syllabi and assignments are designed as a routine feature of the postsecondary workplace.

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