



Why Citing Indigenous Oral Sources Matters

This document explains why citing Indigenous oral sources matters. It contextualizes how and why Indigenous oral sources warrant academic consideration as legitimate contributions to knowledge and research.

Why cite Indigenous oral sources?

Within Indigenous communities, a cognitive shift has taken place. This shift has moved from focusing on “damage-centered research,” which presents deficit-based methods of knowing, doing, and being, to “desire-centered research,” which highlights the creative, flourishing capabilities of Indigenous communities and Indigenous Knowledges (Tuck, 2009). Simply put, Indigenous existence is Indigenous resistance (LaPointe, 2018), and Indigenous existence includes more than just trauma. Incorporating oral sources into research allows the range and diversity of Indigenous experience to be explored more fully. There is a long tradition of scholars having to push for their right to include Indigenous voices in works such as theses though this places an unfair burden on the individual scholar.

Work is being done to legitimize and improve the ability for all scholars to include Indigenous oral sources. This work includes Lorisia MacLeod (2021), a Learning Services Librarian from James Smith Cree Nation of Treaty 6. In 2018, MacLeod and NorQuest College, where MacLeod was a librarian at the time, began developing citation templates for referencing Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers within American Psychological Association (APA) and Modern Language Association (MLA) citation styles (Kornei, 2021). As a result of many scholars’ efforts, the APA and the MLA now include information about citing Indigenous oral sources on their websites for APA 7 and MLA 9 citation styles (APA Style, 2022; MLA Style Center, 2022).

Previously, these citation styles provided little or no guidance for Indigenous oral sources, such as Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers, leaving them to fall under “personal communications.” This phrase represents the ways we may communicate personally with someone: an in-person conversation, a brief phone call or voice message, a text chat, etc. We would also not need to cite the source of the personal communications in our references page (for APA citation style) or our works cited page (for MLA citation style). We would only have to indicate that personal communications had occurred with the appropriate in-text citation. These citation practices unfairly treat Traditional Knowledge as equal to a phone call when they may be knowledges passed through thousands of years. MacLeod wrote,

to use the template for personal communication is to place an Indigenous oral teaching [shared by an Elder or a Traditional Knowledge Keeper] on the same footing as a quick phone call, giving it only a short

in-text citation (as is the standard with personal communication citations) while even tweets are given a reference citation. (p. 2)

Drawing on research from archaeology (Whiteley, 2002), MacLeod (2021) linked her concerns to the place that oral teachings have within academic knowledge frameworks. MacLeod noted, “A common concern from non-Indigenous academics is that, because oral teachings are not written down, they lack consistency and objectivity” (p. 2), but this is not the case. Even before contact with settlers, Indigenous communities evaluate, apply, and think critically about what Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers share making this process not unlike scholarly discourse seen in academia.

If post-secondary institutions and scholars are serious about wanting to decolonize and Indigenize education, then they need to reshape their intellectual frameworks to be as whole and interconnected as possible by including Indigenous research, Knowledges, and perspectives in teaching practices and learning spaces (Poitras Pratt & Gladue, 2022). They need to respond to calls for change, such as the Citations Practices Challenge (Tuck et al., 2015), by including more Indigenous sources, and Indigenous oral sources, on course syllabi and in class contents.

Post-secondary institutions and scholars can also center “Indigenous Voice” in these efforts. According to Gregory Younging (2018), a member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation of Treaty 6 territory, Indigenous Voice maintains continuity with tradition but also expresses where Indigenous Peoples exist currently. It combines Oral Traditions, Traditional Storytelling, and Traditional Stories with technologies and media of the twenty-first century. Indigenous Voice also locates itself by speaking from and connecting Indigenous perspectives both past and present. Younging has described the connection between Oral Traditions and Traditional Knowledge, as specific expressions of Indigenous Voice, with respect to the contexts, histories, and communities from which Indigenous Voice derives. He wrote,

Oral Traditions comprise the stories that have been told for generations, many of which are Sacred Stories. Traditional Knowledge is a wider category: it includes, for example, Indigenous architecture; forest management with fire; medicines and herbology; and knowledge about climate patterns and animal migrations. Traditional Knowledge also includes Oral Traditions. For the most part, Traditional Knowledge is not sacred—but some of it is. The United Nations World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO) refers to Traditional Knowledge that is sacred as “secret and sacred.” Traditional Knowledge contains Sacred Stories within Oral Traditions and sacred aspects of, for example, medicines and herbology. Mostly, though, Traditional Knowledge is information. (p. 12)

Post-secondary institutions are beginning to use, develop, and adapt MacLeod’s (2021) APA and MLA citation templates in efforts to highlight Indigenous Voice and to decolonize and to Indigenize their curricula. She noted that the university-as-institution, which seeks to incorporate new citation formatting into its teaching and learning practices, “gives Indigenous oral knowledge academic credibility by positioning it alongside the conventional forms of written scholarship privileged in Western academia” (p. 3). Younging (2018) has offered a similar interpretation of Indigenous oral sources, in which “it could be said that Traditional Knowledge and Oral Traditions are traditional Indigenous publishing, and the contemporary Indigenous Voice is Indigenous Literature” (p. 13).

Practically, when scholars continue to cite an author who themselves cite an Indigenous oral source, then the work has begun of normalizing Indigenous oral sources as legitimate, credible, and available options when producing academic writing. Such citation and research practices are foundational for creating a new normal for respectful research. Note that students and scholars should follow cultural protocol before interacting with Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers. Similarly, post-secondary institutions typically have publicly available information on their websites about codes of conduct for students and scholars when they consult Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers.

Conclusion

The development of better, more accurate, and more respectful citation, and the complex politics surrounding this important work, is an ongoing conversation that post-secondary institutions, style guides, Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars, and Indigenous communities are having in terms of sharing knowledge and generating research. These conversations are vital for matters such as land title and treaty, health, cultural safety, national security, the environment, economic development, climate change, and more. As this conversation unfolds, the Student Success Centre at the University of Calgary looks to add to this document to include more citation styles in research areas where Indigenous voices and scholars are gaining prominence.

Acknowledgements

Following the [University of British Columbia Library](#) (2022), [the Student Success Centre](#) at the University of Calgary's [Taylor Family Digital Library](#) thanks Lorisia MacLeod and [NorQuest College Library](#) (2023) for developing APA and MLA citation guidelines in the spirit of *wahkôhtowin* and reconciliation. Finally, the Student Success Centre thanks all cited authors in this document for their writings and contributions.

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