

The Youth Knowledge Fair as Land-Based Education

Carrie Karsgaard

Educational Policy Studies, University of Alberta

INTRODUCTION

The Youth Knowledge Fair – in place of a traditional *science* fair – is a means of implementing land-based education (Corn tassel & Hardbarger, 2019; Goodyear-Ka'ōpua 2013; Simpson, 2014; Tuck, McKenzie, & McCoy, 2014). Land-based education overtly works against the detrimental effects of colonial education systems, pairing “Indigenous resurgence and settler reckoning” (Wildcat et al., 2014, p. III) by foregrounding Indigenous knowledge in curriculum content and pedagogy.

The Fair engages with traditional Indigenous knowledge within the Mackenzie River Basin, under the direction and in partnership with Indigenous communities, but in this case facilitated by a settler educator – myself. It provides a concrete space to explore land-based education carried out by Indigenous and non-Indigenous people together, in efforts to support both Indigenous resurgence and the “hard unsettling work” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 4) required by settler educators.



YOUTH KNOWLEDGE FAIR

Grounded in Indigenous conceptions of knowledge, the fair provides a decolonized alternative to mainstream expressions of democratic science education.

Preparation

The students' projects are largely informed by local mentors, who teach them according to local processes and potentially on the land.

Posters

Students develop research posters on the connections between their home ecosystems, histories, and communities under the direction of elders, family, community members, and teachers. Students have choice in how to visually, textually, and orally represent this knowledge, rather than having it categorized for them and separated from its holistic context (Battiste, 2005; Hunt, 2014; Simpson, 2002 & 2004).

Presentations

This knowledge is legitimated and brought into public dialogue through public sharing at a university fair and public climate events – most recently at the 2018 United Nations Climate Conference (COP24) – where students share their community-based learning with the scientists, Indigenous leaders, policy makers, and members of the public who encounter their posters.

By storytelling aloud alongside their posters to the public, students are able to connect their scientific knowledge to personal stories, Indigenous cosmologies, and their local communities, in contrast with the typical categorization of Indigenous knowledge within scientific reporting (Battiste, 2005; Hunt, 2014).

Process

By returning to their communities following these knowledge sharing activities, students complete the circle and are able to dialogue again with their communities about what they have learned through the process of sharing their knowledge.

THE FAIR AS LAND-BASED EDUCATION

1. Holistic Engagement with Indigenous Knowledge

Indigenous knowledge is a “total way of life that comprises a system of respect, sharing, and rules governing the use of resources” (Battiste, 2004, p. 129)

- Poster presentations contain photos, stories, artwork, objects, foods, and artifacts
- Students integrate personal stories, cosmologies, and community histories with ecological knowledge

In education, engagement with the spiritual and contextual nature of traditional ecological knowledge resists categorization and extraction of this knowledge within colonial modes.

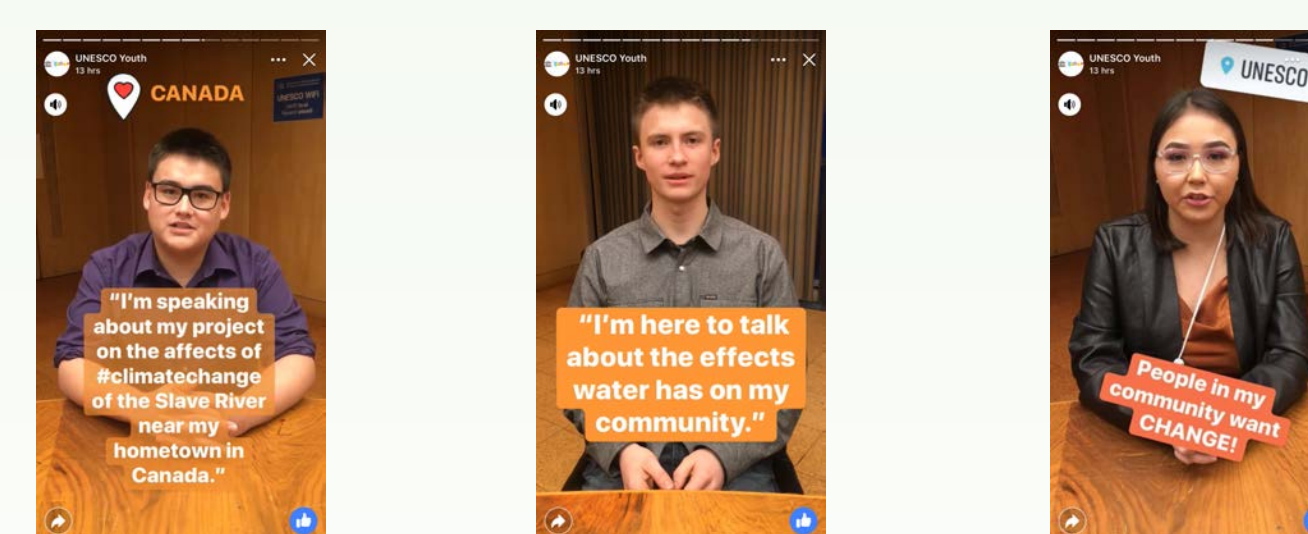


2. Relational Learning from Indigenous Knowledge Holders

Elders and community members have the opportunity to engage with their “renewed responsibilities of assisting others in their reconnections to land, culture and community” (Corn tassel, 2012, p. 89) as they pass on knowledge to the young people.

- Students gather information from elders, family members, harvesters, and other community members, citing these experts or transcribing interviews on their posters
- Indigenous knowledge holders may teach students on the land

By situating knowledge sharing within relationships between youth and community members, the Youth Knowledge Fair reinforces the expertise of local knowledge holders for the benefit of young people and their communities, rather than extracting their knowledge to an institution's advantage.



3. Expression of Indigenous Resistance and Regeneration

In focusing on change rather than stasis, the Youth Knowledge Fair counters damage-centred approaches (Tuck, 2009) to education by centring Indigenous resilience and regeneration even on lands that have been negatively impacted by the intersecting forces of colonization and climate change.

- Youth study *changes* to pertaining to health of water, fish, fishing livelihoods and wellbeing of communities in the Mackenzie River Basin
- Youth connect changes in the land to how their elders and communities have both noticed and responded to change

Issues such as climate change are scientific issues but also *justice* issues that disproportionately affect Indigenous peoples due to colonial histories. Therefore, such issues must be defined and informed by Indigenous peoples, according to their knowledge systems. The Youth Knowledge Fair creates space for young people to share their community's framing of ecological issues – and potentially contribute to determining the issues from their own positions as young people.

LEARNING FROM THE TENSIONS

1. Institutional Barriers

Challenges:

- Slow, expensive, and uneven provision of cell phone and Internet service in the Mackenzie
- University requirements for printing, paperwork, etc. are not accommodating

Colonial institutions must decolonize not only curriculum and pedagogy, but also infrastructures and systems, in order to become places where Indigenous peoples can fully participate. Material considerations are therefore key to land-based education.

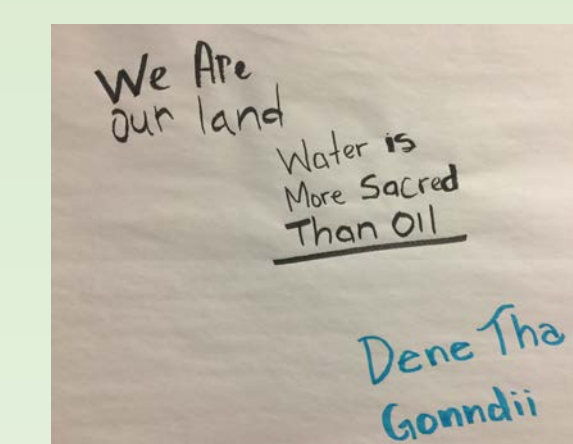


Photo from a poster brainstorm at the 2018 Youth Knowledge Fair.

2. Commodification of Indigenous Knowledge

Challenges at COP24 events:

- Appropriation of students' stories by audience members to legitimate their positions on climate issues
- Tokenization of the youth as Indigenous representatives of Canada's north

Land-based education requires subtle and necessary work in maintaining Indigenous expression without tokenizing it within classrooms, a difficulty that requires ongoing attentiveness.



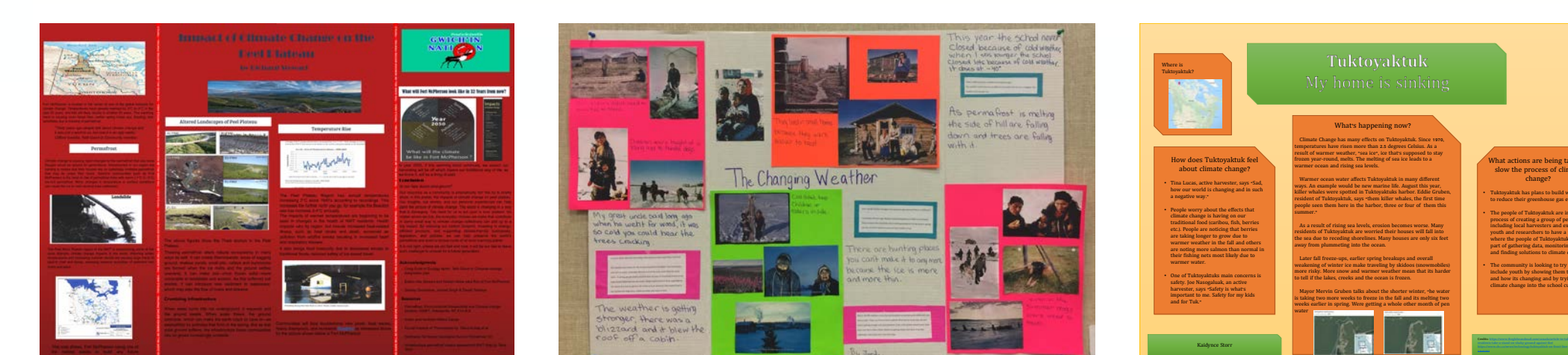
A Maori youth from Aotearoa (New Zealand) thanks the Mackenzie youth for speaking the truth at COP24 and encourages them to continue.

3. Need for Decolonial Approach to Land-Based Education

Challenges:

- Liberal multicultural discourse may treat Indigenous knowledge as merely “cultural expression”
- Land may be commodified for settler growth/development

It is important to teach colonial histories and contexts along with land-based knowledge, including how these histories shape relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada.



SETTLER PERSPECTIVE

I am aware of the tensions inherent in my position as a settler facilitator for this project and as a researcher.

I understand my facilitator role not merely as processual but also relational, as “a focus on Indigenous realities necessitates the development of relationships between schools and local Indigenous peoples” (Calderon, 2014, p. 28). These relationships, while personal, also hold potential to disrupt colonial institutions as we begin to approach our work through “ethical relationality,” seeking to “more deeply understand how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to one another” (Donald, 2009).

I welcome feedback on this poster project and paper – either in person or by email:

CONTACT

Carrie Karsgaard, karsgaard@ualberta.ca



The team at COP24 in Katowice, Poland.

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