Ways of Knowing and Becoming: Learning Together in a Graduate Course on Interdisciplinarity

Andrea V. Breen  
*University of Guelph*, abreen@uoguelph.ca

Tasha A. Falconer  
*University of Guelph*, tfalcone@uoguelph.ca

Kimberly Squires  
*University of Guelph*, ksquires@uoguelph.ca

Stephanie Martin  
*University of Guelph*, smarti38@uoguelph.ca

Anna Swain  
*University of Guelph*, anna.swain@uoguelph.ca

Emma Lipinski  
*University of Guelph*, elipinsk@uoguelph.ca

Kaitlyn Avery  
*University of Guelph*, kavery@uoguelph.ca

Cara Briscoe  
*University of Guelph*, cbriscoe@uoguelph.ca

Caitlin Marchand  
*University of Guelph*, cmarch02@uoguelph.ca

Madison Myers  
*University of Guelph*, mmyers05@uoguelph.ca

Nicole Wylie-Curia  
*University of Guelph*, nwyile@uoguelph.ca

Stephanie Bryenton  
*University of Guelph*, bryentos@uoguelph.ca

Ariana Sams  
*University of Guelph*, asams@uoguelph.ca
Follow this and additional works at: https://www.cjsotl-rcacea.ca
https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotlrcacea.2023.2.14214

Recommended Citation

https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotlrcacea.2023.2.14214
Ways of Knowing and Becoming: Learning Together in a Graduate Course on Interdisciplinarity

Abstract
Developing as a scholar is a critical aspect of graduate school. In this article, we use an autoethnographic approach to explore our experiences in a newly redeveloped interdisciplinary graduate course. The course was designed to emphasize interdisciplinary scholarship and to encourage students’ awareness of their own developing epistemological, ontological, and axiological commitments. In this paper, we identify themes that arose from the final class paper, in which the students/researchers reflected on our development as emerging scholars. Through this course we developed an understanding of the value of interdisciplinarity, the cultural embeddedness of knowledge, and our own responsibilities as researchers in relation to social structures of power and marginalization. Our analyses of our experiences suggests that reflections on our own positionality and axiology are important for developing our identities as emerging scholars and that becoming a scholar may be more about the process than an end goal. We conclude with a discussion of how our learning in this course may be relevant for other instructors and emerging scholars.

Keywords
interdisciplinary, graduate teaching, critical perspectives, Indigenous ways of knowing, axiology; interdisciplinaire, enseignement au niveau des cycles supérieurs, perspectives critiques, modes de connaissance autochtones, axiologie

This research paper/Rapport de recherche is available in The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning:
https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotlrcacea.2023.2.14214
In this article, we examine our learning as a group of students and a course instructor in *Interdisciplinary Perspectives in Family Relations and Human Development*, the foundational course for first-year students in graduate programs in Family Relations and Human Development and an elective for students in the Couple and Family Therapy MSc program. This examination is based on the final paper students wrote in the class, which discussed their emerging identities as scholars. The course examined a variety of theoretical perspectives that inform the study of Family Relations and Human Development, as well as theoretical and applied approaches to interdisciplinarity. In 2019, Dr. Andrea Breen redeveloped the course to include content relating to traditional (Western) approaches to family relationships, critical (e.g., Feminist, Queer) theories, and Indigenous Ways of Knowing. The new course aimed to get “underneath” the theories and methods that shape and are replicated by disciplinary traditions to examine ontological, epistemological, and axiological underpinnings. As the instructor, Dr. Andrea Breen’s scholarship has included an emphasis on identity development in adolescence and adulthood and the course also emphasized arts-based and narrative approaches to facilitating identity processes relevant to students developing their own identities as emerging scholars.

We incorporated a variety of activities, including student presentations and several guest speakers. A complete list of topics, readings, speakers, and activities is provided in Table 1. We recognize that our choices and commitments in theory and methodology are rooted in who we are; in other words, research is often connected to self-identity. There are many different definitions and approaches to self-identity; the one taken in this course is based in the instructor’s expertise in narrative approaches to identity (e.g., Breen et al., 2016; Breen et al., 2019; Myrie et al., 2021). The life story approach to identity (e.g., McAdams, 2008) emphasizes that the development of self and identity occurs through dialectical processes involving interaction with other peoples’ stories—including stories told to us directly and those we encounter through media and art (Breen et al., 2017; Mclean & Breen, 2016).

Throughout the course, we used story-sharing and art to encourage self-reflection and identity development. On the first day, students were asked to write freely about our ‘relationship with knowledge’ and then work together to develop metaphors and produce poems. For most students, this was the first time we had ever considered the question, *what is my relationship with knowledge?* Grounded in Indigenist approaches that emphasize the agentic and relational dimensions of knowledge (Wilson, 2008), this exercise provided an introduction to Indigenist Ways of Knowing and the emphasis on self-reflection that continued throughout the course, while also providing an opportunity for students to connect with one another on a topic that was new to everyone using playful, artistic means.
Table 1
Outline of Course Activities

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Topic</th>
<th>Assigned Readings</th>
<th>Activities and Guest Speakers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introductions</td>
<td>Hamby, 2018.</td>
<td>Introductory Activity: What is your relationship with Knowledge?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Identities</td>
<td>Hyland, 2018; McAdams &amp; Logan, 2006.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Functionalist Theory, Conflict Theory, and</td>
<td>Allen &amp; Henderson, 2016. Focus on the following chapters:</td>
<td>Student Presentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Symbolic Interactionism</td>
<td>Family Theories (pp. iii-viii), What is a Theory (pp. 1-19), Functionalist Theory (pp. 20-40), &amp; Conflict Theory (pp. 41-60). Symbolic Interactionist Theory (pp. 61-81)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Family Developmental Theory, Family Systems</td>
<td>Allen &amp; Henderson, 2016. Focus on the following chapters:</td>
<td>Student Presentations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Theory, and Social Exchange Theory</td>
<td>Family Developmental Theory (pp. 82-102) and Family Systems Theory (pp. 103-123), Social Exchange Theory (pp. 124-144).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Light Exhibit</td>
<td></td>
<td>Guest Speaker: Dr. Adam Davies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Guest Speaker: Dr. Evadne Kelly</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Doing Interdisciplinary Research</td>
<td>Chamoun et al., 2018; Nancarrow et al., 2013.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Allen &amp; Henderson, 2016. Please read the following chapter:</td>
<td>Student Presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Life Course Theory (pp. 166-186).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Topic</td>
<td>Assigned Readings</td>
<td>Activities and Guest Speakers</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>-------------------------------------------</td>
<td>----------------------------------------</td>
<td>-------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Feminist Theory</td>
<td>Rice, 2018.</td>
<td>Student Presentation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Please read the following chapters:</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Feminist Theory (pp. 145-165).</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Indigenous Theory</td>
<td>Anderson &amp; Ball, 2015.</td>
<td>Guest Speaker: Dr. Kim Anderson</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Wilson et al., 2019.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sexuality Research from a Post-Positivist</td>
<td>No assigned Reading</td>
<td>Guest Speaker: Dr. Tuuli Kukkonen</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lens</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research and Reconciliation</td>
<td>Wilson et al., 2019.</td>
<td>Guest Speaker: Lindsay Dupré</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research and Reconciliation (Continued)</td>
<td>Wilson et al., 2019.</td>
<td>Wrap-up Activity. Reflecting on our relationship with knowledge.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note.* This list of course activities is provided to explain the context of the course and the students’ learning. We recognize that these course activities may not be relevant to all disciplines.
The emphasis on self-reflection and story-sharing continued through our interaction with guest speakers (see Table 1 for details) and texts, particularly the edited book, *Research and Reconciliation: Unsettling Ways of Knowing through Indigenous Relationships* (Wilson et al., 2019; note that Dr. Andrea Breen was an editor of this book). Our emphasis on Indigenous Ways of Knowing spanned several weeks and was intended to introduce students to Indigenous approaches to research while also making explicit the (usually implicit) cultural assumptions that are foundational to knowledge within and across disciplines. This is important for training students who will work as part of multidisciplinary, interdisciplinary, and transdisciplinary teams as working across disciplinary “cultures” is facilitated by understanding the epistemic, ontological, and methodological foundations of knowledge (Moon & Blackman, 2014). More importantly, learning about Indigenous Ways of Knowing also introduced students to the legacies and ongoing practices of epistemic violence enacted by Western knowledge systems which contribute to colonization through the erasure and marginalization of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing (e.g., Absolon, 2011, Anloos, 2018; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 1999; Wilson et al., 2022). The stories, poems, and visual art profiled in *Research and Reconciliation* (Wilson et al., 2019) encourage readers to consider the ways in which colonialism can operate, often undetected, in relation to all phases of research, from theoretical assumptions and study design to knowledge mobilization. It was hoped that this content and the arts-based, relational pedagogical approach used throughout the course would encourage students to carefully consider the possibilities—and their responsibilities—for making their own meaningful and authentic contributions to reconciliation in their work as emerging scholars (Ottmann, 2021).

Considerations of the role of western knowledge systems in colonialism and other forms of structural violence were also facilitated through attending an exhibit at the Guelph Civic Museum, which examined the history of eugenics in Ontario and the role of educational institutions (including our own) in the eugenics movement. *Into the Light: Eugenics and Education in Southern Ontario* used art to centre the experience of people who were targets of eugenics campaigns. Curated by Mona Stonefish, Peter Park, Dolleen Tisawii’ashii Manning, Evadne Kelly, Seika Boye, and Sky Stonefish, the exhibit used art and sensory experience to reveal the hidden history of eugenics. In having students attend this exhibit, the aim was to encourage critical and ethical thinking, and deeper understanding that research is not a “neutral” enterprise. Because the exhibit highlighted the complicity of researchers from our own institution and college in the eugenics movement, it was expected that students might examine their personal affiliations and identities as emerging scholars in relation to this history and develop a new appreciation for the importance of axiological commitments in research.

There were several written assignments in this course, including reflective writing on both the *Research and Reconciliation* text and the *Into the Light* exhibit. The final assignment required students to reflect on their learning throughout the course. Specifically, students were expected to consider their identity development as emerging scholars. Given that part of graduate school is making a transition for people to start to see themselves as scholars, the paper was designed to encourage the students to start to consider themselves as emerging scholars. As described in detail below, students’ writing for this assignment serves as the data we used for the present research. The instructions for this assignment were as follows:

The final paper requires you to research and write about your own experience and learning in the course. You will be keeping “process” notes, which record your own experiences, observations, interactions and reactions in relation to course content. The final paper
requires you to analyze your own experiences and write a 2000-word essay answering the question, who am I (at this point) as a Scholar? Be sure to reference your own learning in relation to theoretical orientations, disciplinary training and allegiances, and your understanding of your own ontological, axiological, epistemological and methodological orientations. Students are expected to draw on readings beyond those included in the course syllabus. Please note, you do not need to have “arrived” at a clear definition of yourself as a scholar or to have made commitments to certain positions. We expect you to be “a story in progress”. Questioning, pointing out inconsistencies, etc. is all most welcome.

The Current Project

As Dr. Breen (the instructor) reviewed the final assignments, she was impressed by the depth of learning and reflection and felt that our experiences as a class might be of interest to others who are teaching and learning about interdisciplinarity, research ethics, decolonizing approaches to research and graduate student training, and/or student identity development. Once grades were submitted, Dr. Breen posted an announcement on the course website inviting students to contact her if they were interested in working together on a group publication, focusing on everyone's teaching and learning in this class. To ensure that no students who were interested had missed the announcement, she sent an email out to the entire class list approximately one month later to inform everyone of the first meeting date and to offer a final invitation to be involved. The email stressed that involvement was voluntary and that there would be a variety of levels of roles for those who were interested in committing more or less time to the project.

The course had 19 students enrolled in it and 17 students joined this first meeting or expressed an initial interest in being part of the project. Prior to the data analysis phase, four students decided not to continue with the project due to other interests and priorities. Two other students decided to leave the project in the initial data analysis and writing phases, again due to other interests. If a student did not continue as an author, their data was removed from the project to ensure the integrity of our method as autoethography (all researchers were also participants). A total of 11 of the 19 students in the course continued with the project in some way (see Table 2).

Students were able to take on responsibilities within the project depending on their interest and availability, and the amount of time they were able to dedicate to it. The varied opportunities ensured that students were able to participate in a way that felt comfortable and manageable for them and ensured that more students were able to be involved, not just the students that had more extra time. Writing this paper together provided a way for students to share their stories and continue learning, including learning about all phases of the publication process. We continued to meet regularly in the summer after the course was completed and began writing in Fall 2020. As we note in the Discussion below, our meetings continued throughout the early phases of the COVID-19 pandemic, providing an opportunity to continue to connect and learn as a group.

Method

The students/authors of this article represent a range of disciplines and emphases within the larger field of family relations and human development. Table 2 provides information about students’ research interests and disciplinary training. Some of the students self-identify as qualitative researchers and others as quantitative, and students’ epistemic positionality ranges from post-positivist to social constructivist to critical. Most students entered the course with a
background in a single discipline; as such, the interdisciplinary approach was new for the majority of students.

Table 2
Researcher Backgrounds, Program, and Interests

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Pronoun</th>
<th>Disciplinary Background (e.g., Psychology, Sociology, etc.)</th>
<th>Research Interests</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Anna Swain</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>Clinical Developmental Psychology</td>
<td>Children with disabilities and their families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caitlin Marchand</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>Psychology/Mental Health Studies</td>
<td>Grief and bereavement, forgiveness in couples and families</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cara Biscoe</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Power dynamics in couple therapy, experiences of folks living with HIV/AIDS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Emma Lipinski</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Gerontology, Diverse experiences of Aging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kaitlyn Avery</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>Social Psychology</td>
<td>Families with children with disabilities, social support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kimberly Squires</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>Child Development and Education</td>
<td>Early learning, nature-based pedagogies, children’s connections with nature</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Madison Myers</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Child maladaptive behaviours, families of children with disabilities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie Martin</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>Young Carers during COVID-19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tasha Falconer</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>Sexual health</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Stephanie Bryenton</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>Psychology / Family &amp; Child Studies</td>
<td>Child welfare and the impact of family conflict</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nicole Wylie-Curia</td>
<td>she/her</td>
<td>Child Development and Disabilities</td>
<td>Young Carers during COVID-19</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As both authors and participants, the method we used is a form of autoethnography (Adams et al., 2015). The focus of this project was to use personal experiences and reflective processes to illustrate our learning and development as emerging scholars. In doing so, we, as authors, will refer to ourselves as participants and students throughout the paper. Following the advice of our Research Ethics Board (REB), we did not submit this project for review. In order to ensure that participation was entirely voluntary for all, students were invited to participate after final course grades were submitted.

The data for this project were students’ final class papers. We reviewed only the papers that were completed by the authors and did not include work by students who opted not to participate in this research. We took a team approach to analyses and used the following steps:
First, we read all the papers in order to familiarize ourselves with the data. Next, we met three times to discuss our initial impressions of the data. In large group meetings, we collaborated to identify the major thematic areas and divided into subgroups. Each subgroup worked within a thematic area to read more deeply and conduct more fine-grained analyses of the themes. We then met again multiple times as a large group to discuss these themes and the data, which included reorganization and restructuring of the paper. Each subgroup began writing their respective section before the authors came together as a whole to edit the paper for cohesiveness and clarity. In our large and small groups, we worked to create accuracy in the story that was being told. This in part was achieved by the participants reading over the paper multiple times to ensure that the story resonated with them and to adjust as appropriate and contribute to monthly analysis meetings, during which we discussed and revised themes. The process of revising themes continued through the process of writing; as we worked on preparing the manuscript, we continued to make small adjustments to the themes to avoid overlap and to ensure that the participants’ perspectives were accurately represented.

Data analysis was a collaborative process with leadership from the group of students and assistance from the instructor. Specifically, the meetings were organized by students and the instructor assumed a supportive role. Analyses were carried out by students and the instructor assisted with conceptualization and the organization of the writing. The instructor wrote the first draft of the Introduction and Method section, and these were subsequently developed by the students. The instructor also completed the final edit of the paper, which largely involved edits for consistency of voice and style.

In the following section we report on the themes that we developed through our analyses. We point out that this is an evolving story; that these themes represent a snapshot in time. What we saw at a particular period in our own development and our relationships with each other. Our work on this paper is informed by post-qualitative notions that emphasize meaning-making as interpretive acts (e.g., Wiley & Wise, 2019) and the continuous, emergent nature of our own relationships with knowledge (Wilson, 2008; Wilson et al., 2019) and ongoing relationships with each other. The themes we describe are our interpretations of our individual and collective experience in the context of our continuously changing relationships with knowledge. Please note that, while we are simultaneously authors and participants, for simplicity we refer to ourselves throughout this manuscript simply as “participants” and “students.”

**Results**

As described in detail below, we identified the following themes in our writing: the value of interdisciplinarity, the value of different ways of knowing, reflections on positionality, axiology, and becoming.

**The Value of the Interdisciplinarity**

Research on interdisciplinarity in higher education emphasizes the importance of facilitating a learning environment that encourages appreciative inquiry (Greybill et al., 2006), where students are encouraged to learn from one another instead of competing against each other. Evidenced by participant excerpts, the course instructor co-created (along with the students) a space that encouraged students to explore and further develop our relationships with knowledge-our identities.
The course served as an invitation to reflect on the theoretical and methodological knowledge we had gained in our previous studies and to explore possibilities for incorporating multiple disciplines—and ways of knowing—in current and future work. In our writing, students described the importance of the interdisciplinarity approach and emphasis of the course. For example, Cara noted that:

“The interdisciplinarity of this course, including the various guest speakers and unique ways of learning that were included, have greatly contributed to the change in my relationship with knowledge by providing opportunity for new perspectives and connections to be formed.”

For Emma, the course fostered the realization that growth as an emerging scholar necessitates interacting with ideas outside of one’s own experience:

“To continue to grow as a scholar, I will strive for opportunities to learn and hear perspectives of those who are unique from my own to have a better understanding of the society in which we all navigate.”

For Stephanie B., the value of interdisciplinarity lies in the possibilities that exist for challenging one’s own biases: “I strongly believe that interdisciplinary collaboration among individuals with differing theoretical perspectives provides incredibly rich opportunities, to challenge our biases and produce more generalizable findings.”

Several students emphasized that interdisciplinary approaches also provide new possibilities for generativity, creativity, and impact. The following two excerpts by Madison and Kaitlyn illustrate this idea:

“…as an interdisciplinary researcher I am not cemented in just one subject or field forever. Opportunities exist to branch out into different areas, gain knowledge and create research that has the ability to generate real change across a broader spectrum.” (Madison)

Interdisciplinary education is an avenue for me to foster creativity and diversity in the approaches that I take to research. Interdisciplinarity allows me to draw on different theoretical perspectives to draw new questions and inspire research...” (Kaitlyn)

Through the experiences of this course, some participants also recognized that there is flexibility in disciplinary perspectives that can inform both their research and their identities as emerging scholars. For example, Kaitlyn stated:

“…learning to understand multiple identities through an interdisciplinary approach reminds me that the intellectual divide between academic fields does not have to be constrictive. […] Interdisciplinary research allows for connections between different disciplines and a deeper understanding of knowledge.”

Overall, participants’ reflections suggest that the course’s emphasis on interdisciplinarity provided opportunities for deep learning, creativity, and our own development as emerging scholars.
The Value of Different Ways of Knowing

The course provided various learning opportunities, including traditional approaches (e.g., reading dominant family theories in textbooks) and artistic and Indigenist approaches to learning (e.g., story-sharing, visiting the Into the Light exhibit, arts-based activities in class). Participants discussed the importance of these varied learning experiences for accessing different ways of learning and developing new insights.

Anna reflected that the “Into the Light exhibit […] was a truly fascinating and deep-learning experience that brought to my attention and highlighted the importance of human rights, social justice, and disability studies research.” Some participants noted that the course provided a unique learning opportunity that was different from previous academic experiences. As Emma noted,

“Previously, my education has primarily been reading academic texts, stats, and figures on populations and issues at hand. Hearing stories from various people in unique situations from my own has brought the information to life and showed the real implications and impacts that policy, practices, and institutional and social structures have on us as we navigate our lives.”

Similarly, Cara noted that her “[previous] learning was primarily done from textbooks and attending lectures, with alternate methods such as art or story telling largely being ignored.” For Caitlin this made “knowledge seem like this exclusive thing that you went to school to have the privilege of slicing a small piece off for yourself.” Caitlin also stated that her “eyes are now opened to the idea of there being many different types of knowledges and ways of knowing”.

For most participants, this course provided their first exposure to Indigenous Ways of Knowing. This was not the case for everyone, however. As Stephanie B stated, “as an Indigenous student, I do find myself to be more conscious of this way of thinking in comparison to peers in my cohort.” As students learned about critical theory (Queer theory and Feminist theory) and Indigenist ways of knowing, they articulated awareness of the ways in which Western (Eurocentric) knowledge is privileged in higher education, and even used as a weapon of epistemic violence. Cara discussed that “when knowledge is shared and valued, it is typically knowledge that is consistent with or beneficial to white settlers.” Further to this point, Caitlin spoke about how “knowledge is socially constructed … [and] not all knowledge is given the same weight.” As Kaitlyn expressed, “Western knowledge systemically oppresses viewpoints outside of the dominant discourse and minimizes Indigenous knowledge to [fit within] Western contexts.” While some participants reflected on what constitutes knowledge, others considered how that knowledge impacts marginalized groups. For example, Ariana stated, “in a place of privilege, it is crucial to question the ways that we [and the most powerful] disseminate knowledge, and how that knowledge impacts those who hold less power [and] less privileged positions in society.”

Along with developing new awareness of the power structures that prioritize dominant, Eurocentric ways of knowing, students also described their own emerging commitments to disrupting hegemony. Kaitlyn recognized the limited point of view academia offers: “the notion of unlearning and recognizing knowledge as non-linear is crucial in my development as a scholar, as much of my ontological perspectives are built from dominant Western worldviews”. Ariana reflected that “academia does not always render all narratives/realities ‘visible’ (whether
intentionally or unintentionally).” She went on to say that this awareness has changed her approach to learning and research, and she is now “actively choosing to seek sources that are different and unsettling.” Cara made connections between epistemological and ontological concerns, and axiological commitments when she stated, “by questioning the status-quo of what constitutes knowledge and how it gets to us, I think we are being more accountable to those who are marginalized within society, ourselves and to our relationships.”

As these excerpts suggest, the emphasis on different ways of knowing was an important part of students’ learning. Critical and decolonial approaches to education require that we do not just introduce topics relating to power and marginalization, but that we also introduce ways of knowing that challenge and extend beyond western (European/North American) approaches to knowledge production and dissemination (e.g., Archibald, 2014; Kovach, 2008; Wilson et al., 2019; Wilson et al., 2022). Students’ reflections on their learning suggest that providing access to ways of knowing that have been marginalized within the social sciences, provides opportunities for “eyes to be opened” and “deep learning” about the importance of social justice in research, and the ways in which violence is enacted through adherence to epistemologies that claim superiority of Eurocentric ways of knowing.

While the students recognized the importance of engaging in critical and decolonial ways of thinking, they also acknowledged that this process was not comfortable. Kaitlyn reflected on her discomfort with the educational system when she said, “This system of discourse [Western knowledge] caters to the privilege I experience, and I am uncomfortable with the level of normalized racist thinking and white superiority that exists within education systems.” Instead of shying away from feelings of discomfort, some students reflected on the importance of being content in discomfort. Ariana said, “Part of developing my academic identity and understanding my relationship to knowledge was [and is] through vulnerability; through resistance; through sitting with an ugly and uncomfortable sweater; and through “daring” to shift from a “comfortable” position to a position of unknowns.” Further, Cara noted that “I have to say that some of the learning experiences I have had so far have been uncomfortable and new, however I don’t think I could call it learning if all of my experiences were within my comfort zone.” As illustrated in these quotes, students understood that unlearning was not easy and brought up many negative emotions that they needed to work through, but that this was an important part of the process.

**Reflections on Positionality**

The course invited students to think deeply about our own positionality, including the experiences, identities, relationships, and commitments that shape our intertwined personal, professional, and academic identities. For many of us, our emerging identities as researchers and scholars are connected to personal experience. Nicole shared how her personal life-changing experience in childhood has shaped the curiosities that propel her research:

“I was diagnosed with leukemia at seven years old and was lucky that I was in a healthcare system where I had a good chance of getting well. This was a significant experience in my life and led me to meeting many families affected by childhood cancer. Through observing what happened in my family, as well as other families I worked with, wanting to understand how difficult events affected families was a curiosity that I carried with me throughout most of my life. This information may not be a perfectly curated reflexivity statement, but all of it contributes to my positionality, which I will keep in mind as a researcher.”
For Kimberly, reflecting on her positionality brought to the fore the intersections of her personal and professional identities:

“It seems important to first examine the journey that has gotten me to this point in my academic and professional career, just as we did at the beginning of this course… My positionality is largely influenced, personally, professionally and as a researcher, by being an Early Childhood Educator... I have formed many beliefs about early learning that have influenced my perspective as a person, professional, and researcher.”

Participants valued the opportunity to reflect on their positionalities and felt that this was important for their work as researchers. For example, Caitlin noted that “since we cannot remove ourselves from our social contexts, [we can] take them into consideration to avoid creating limitations in our research.” The importance of engaging in reflexive practice was noted by Ariana: “what has been important in my process towards developing an academic and ‘personal methodological identity’, is to remind myself to constantly engage in self-reflexivity; to always question the intersections that underlie what and how I know.”

The ongoing process of learning and developing our identities as emerging scholars led participants to reflect specifically on the different forms of power and privilege that have impacted our own experience and identities. For example, Cara stated that, “While I feel a sense of guilt for having advantages that are unearned, it is undeniable that these intersecting identities have an impact on who I am and who I am becoming as a scholar.” Similarly, Kaitlyn stated, “[as] a white, cis-female that [came] from predominantly white, middle-upper class neighbourhoods, I have been existing within a set of privileges that not everyone experiences. The privilege that exists within access to higher education, job security, and a stable socioeconomic status, has been a distinct feature in the development of my identity. It is not enough to learn about the marginalization and discrimination that exists within dominant society. As someone who holds a certain level of privilege, I recognize that I move through the world much easier than others. Systemic inequities that perpetuate marginalization continue to exist, but I can learn to bridge the gap by listening and learning how to create space.”

Each of us experiences our own relationships with power and privilege and so these reflections were varied and often quite personal. For students whose identities tend to be marginalized within classrooms and research contexts, the inclusion of critical and Indigenist theories led to reflections on their own belonging within institutions. Stephanie B reflected on the course’s inclusion of Queer theory:

“[as] I identify with the queer community, I anticipated to be a little uncomfortable in this conversation. […] When they explained that queer theory challenges heteronormativity, how heterosexuality is institutionalized and normalized and how it can deconstruct binary ways of thinking, I felt a sense of comfort and calm. I felt like a piece of me had been found and that I was not alone in what I had been feeling and thinking for so many years. I identified within myself that queer theory is something that was important to me and made me who I am today.”
As these excerpts suggest, each of us brings to our work our own personal, academic and professional experiences. For some participants, inclusion of critical and Indigenist theories and the course’s emphasis on self-reflection of our own privileged positions; while for others, this resonated with identities that are often marginalized within academic institutions and provided a safer space for belonging.

**Axiological Commitments**

In addition to the discussion of identity and scholarly development, the final assignment invited students to reflect on their axiological stances – the personal values that shape their academic positionality and inform future work. This emphasis of the course resonated for students, as they were committed to enlivening their values through their research. Emma reflected: “I value equity, fairness, and equal opportunities for individuals and communities to tell their stories and have a role in the research which impacts them.” Anna wrote:

> “While I am still looking for a specific word for values (Human rights? Social justice? Love and mercy?), it is clear for me that research I would like to conduct should have applications to these areas and reflect on changes to be done to improve oppression and stigma of those who need extra attention and support.”

For students like Emma and Anna, research is a vehicle to advance the values that are important to them. For some students, reflecting on axiology provided insight into possible “sticky points” in their research. For example, Madison described the importance of being aware of the ways in which her personal values might create challenges for her as a researcher:

> “My values of treating others with kindness, understanding, and giving others the power to share and disclose what they want about themselves. I also value the respect and approval of others, and I must keep this in mind for my future as a researcher, as I do not want to let myself change my research with the sole purpose of pleasing someone.”

While students generally described the ways in which their values would be expressed through their research, others emphasized that the interwoven relationship between values and research. For example, Kaitlyn stated:

> “I believe that research and values have a bidirectional relationship. It is impossible to know the values that you hold true without engaging in research that questions your ethical considerations. It is through research that I have discovered the concepts that I consider valuable and necessary components, but it is through our core values that we engage in the research that we want to.”

Considerations of axiology brought to the fore the issue of researcher neutrality. Participants held differing stances on these notions. Stephanie M reflected:

> “The values that one brings to their research, referred to as axiology, has labelled a concept that I have confronted in both my role as a teacher and a scholar. To what extent should our work be neutral? Prior to this program, I believed that neutrality was
imperative in all professional and academic settings. I have since shifted my perspective as a result of learning about the Indigenous ways of knowing in the context of epistemology, ontology, axiology and theoretical frameworks.”

Many students discussed the importance of avoiding claims of neutrality and being mindful of the ways in which their own identities, beliefs and values influence their research. Kimberly stated:

“We are all embedded within stories and must be aware of the stories that we are telling and how they create our realities… As an educator and a researcher, what are the stories that I want to tell? How do my assumptions and biases impact the stories that I share in my research?”

Similarly, Tasha reflected on the reality that researchers’ values are always part of the research story: “I think that it is important to recognize our biases, especially when informing the public.” She goes on to add: “I am in no way unbiased in my research and understanding of sexuality but will continue to consider the implications of the data I put into the world.”

For participants in the class, the emphasis on axiology led to questioning the concept of neutrality in research and awareness of the ways in which their own values may be enlivened through academic work.

**Becoming**

There were two ways in which students’ writing reflected becoming. The first had to do with learning and the continuous process of gaining new knowledge, awareness and insight. Many students spoke about an emerging recognition that learning is a process, with no clear “end point.” In the following excerpts, students reflect on the value of process versus product, fluidity in knowledge, and an ever-evolving relationship with knowledge.

Cara said that she “place[d] a lot of value on the process of learning throughout this course,” while Kaitlyn acknowledged that she has not “reached a point of ‘all-knowing,’ but rather, existing within a new environment has cultivated a continuous cycle of learning, unlearning, and creating change.” Stephanie M furthered this point by stating that she had “learned that it is the fluidity of knowledge that allows one to continually learn and remain open to new ways of knowing.”

The second aspect of becoming centered on identity. For some participants, the course provided a context that contributed to ongoing becoming of self and the emergence of new identity commitments, especially as an emerging scholar. For example, Anna wrote: “I am certain that I have a greater understanding of who I am, why I am here, what do I want (to know and to do), what is important for me.” Most of the participants acknowledged that becoming a scholar was a journey, and that they did not feel that they had not yet arrived at an end point. Emma acknowledged that: “Who I was as a scholar before this semester is not the same as who I am now as the semester comes to a close. Similarly, who I am as a researcher now will not be the same as who I will be in the future.” For Stephanie B the course contributed to her scholarly identity in a different way; as she describes, learning about Queer and Indigenist theories in this course was an important part of finding her own orientations and belonging as an emerging scholar:
“I found a sense of competency as a Scholar in this course, a sense of identity that I belong in a program that is challenging. I found a sense of peace within myself to be able to pursue what felt true to my theoretical orientations. Most importantly, I found the beginning to my “story in progress…”

As illustrated throughout this paper, the students recognized that learning is a continuous process. This understanding extended to the experience of becoming a researcher, in that it is not an end point, but a journey. Throughout the course, students were able to better understand their identity as an emerging scholar and the fluidity of becoming a scholar.

Discussion

Our reflections from this class reflect the existing literature that has recognized the value of the interdisciplinary context for graduate student learning (Greybill et al, 2006; Shandas & Brown, 2016). This course allowed both academic learning, such as through lessons on epistemology, ontology, and axiology, and personal development through experiences with multiple ways of knowing and learning, such as engaging in self-reflection and arts-based learning activities. Learning in an interdisciplinary context allowed for the emergence of new ideas and new ways of knowing, which allowed some students to find value in looking beyond their own perspectives, while providing opportunities for others to find belonging. Additionally, learning through story-sharing and art allowed students to self-reflect and develop their identity through a life story approach (e.g., McAdams, 2008). This approach recognizes that identity is created through our interaction with others, including stories told to us and one's encountered through media and art (Breen et al., 2017; Mclean & Breen, 2016). As researchers, we learned to find value in interdisciplinary perspectives and deconstruct the notion that dominant Western ways of knowing are superior. By engaging in arts-based opportunities for self-reflection, we gained greater appreciation for the need to continuously deconstruct our experiences and reflect on our positionality, and the ways in which are identities and values both shape and are shaped by the research we do. As we continue to develop our identities as emerging scholars, we understand the implications of our social location and the privilege of learning from our mistakes. Engaging in self-reflection through attending exhibits, reading, learning, and unlearning has given us an understanding of the link between colonization and our own varied experiences of privilege and marginalization.

The course and writing of this paper have had an impact on our identities as emerging scholars and individuals. While the impact of this course varied for each student, it has been noted throughout this process that we have all been impacted in some way. Some students were exposed to completely new information and experiences, while others were validated by the information and experiences, and there were students who experienced a combination of both. Our learning in this course impacted our understanding of who we are; specifically, how we view and define ourselves as emerging scholars, as well as how we envision our current and future practice. Many of us have learned that we do not need to be stuck in one discipline, but that there is space to belong in a variety of contexts. Additionally, participants obtained a deeper understanding of the implications of our research topics and processes. Many students considered how different positionalities impact the work they do with others. Moreover, the learning that took place influenced our personal lives. Some participants found that they now have increased self-awareness, mindfulness, and awareness of sociohistorical factors.
Conducting this research and writing this paper together provided us with the opportunity to engage in interdisciplinary work far beyond the class requirements. Working collaboratively on this project for more than a year gave us an opportunity to both deepen and extend our learning of interdisciplinarity in practice. We continued to learn about the course content through engaging with each other’s writing and in conversation for months following the completion of the course, while also gaining skills and experience in qualitative data analysis and scholarly writing. As we reflect on this experience, it is evident to us that we benefitted from our continued engagement with each other and with the ideas first introduced in this text and we would encourage graduate programs—including our own—to consider ways to provide spaces for relationships and support for ongoing processes of scholarly identity development beyond the typical parameters of classes.

The context of our personal and academic lives changed quite a bit throughout this process due to a variety of individual and societal factors. When we first started this paper, we were able to gather in person to share our thoughts, ideas, and perspectives. Shortly into the paper, we were forced to move our thinking and work online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Moving to an online format had an impact on our ability to connect and added additional challenges to our work. In addition, the development of the pandemic as well as a variety of related and unrelated life experiences, made it challenging for some students to continue with the paper and our group membership and authorship shifted throughout the process. It is possible that through this process of members needing to leave or take a step back from the paper, their perspectives may have been missed in some discussions. We must acknowledge that this paper is a snapshot in time and, as has happened over the last year since finishing this course, our learning is ongoing and will continue to grow.

Our experience has been that the processes of self-reflection and relational learning that began in this class has also contributed to our individual identity development as researchers—it has informed who we want to be and provided an important context for us to understand and bring closer into alignment our personal and professional selves. While this research speaks to our own unique experiences in a particular course, we believe this project may be relevant to teachers and students who are interested in issues of epistemic justice, interdisciplinary approaches, and scholarly identity development. We believe that taking the time to understand the implicit assumptions and biases that underpin various approaches to research in the social sciences, our own values, and connections between the two is an essential foundation for conducting effective and ethical research in the social sciences and this course provides an example of one such approach. While our individual paths as researchers and practitioners will take different directions, we appreciated this opportunity to engage in relationships with one another and with ideas and perspectives that have deepened our relationships with knowledge.

References


