

No Easy Task: Making Permanent an Indigenous Knowledge Engagement Course that Changes Lives



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Abstract: In May 2015, Penn State University’s Curriculum Committee approved two related courses: CED 400, Exploring Indigenous Ways of Knowing in the Great Lakes Region, and CED 401, Exploring Indigenous Ways of Knowing among the Ojibwe. This article traces the evolution of the courses over its decade long history.

Keywords: North America, Great Lakes Region, Education, Ojibwe, cultural education, higher education, community engagement, indigenous knowledge

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In May 2015, Penn State University’s Curriculum Committee approved two related courses: CED 400, Exploring Indigenous Ways of Knowing in the Great Lakes Region, and CED 401, Exploring Indigenous Ways of Knowing among the Ojibwe. A course focused on indigenous knowledge of the Ojibwe has been offered at The Pennsylvania State University by Dr. Bruce Martin under an experimental course number for more than a decade, but at long last the course has found a permanent home in Community, Environment, and Development (CED), a rapidly growing program led by Dr. Leland Glenna in the Department of Agricultural Economics, Sociology, and Education in the College of Agricultural Sciences. During the eleven years in which the Ojibwe experience was an experimental (497) course, more than 220 Penn State students learned through Dr. Martin about the indigenous peoples of the Great Lakes Region and experienced a unique cultural engagement with Ojibwe in the Red Lake, Leech Lake, and White Earth nations in Northern Minnesota. He describes how engagement for learning in indigenous communities can change students’ lives.

Exploring Indigenous Ways of Knowing among the Ojibwe is the Maymester “cultural engagement” segment of a two-part course offered since 2004. The first part of the course is taught on Penn State’s University Park campus and explores indigenous ways of knowing in the Great Lakes region. Why focus on indigenous knowledge in the Great Lakes region and highlight the Ojibwe culture in a state

(Pennsylvania) which has no federally recognized reservation communities, little historical memory of the Delaware people, and no current connection to the Ojibwe people who now reside around the western Great Lakes?

The Great Lakes region encompasses all states and Canadian provinces bordering one or more of these inland seas, including Pennsylvania, which borders Lake Erie. The indigenous nations surrounding the Great Lakes have distinctive cultural traits that set them apart from others in the wider Algonquian language group. The lakes make a difference in a worldview that emphasizes local production of knowledge. Because the Leni Lenape (Delaware) of Eastern Pennsylvania, the progenitor nation of the Three Fires (Ojibwe, Odawa, Potawatomi), and because the Delaware, Shawnee, and other indigenous nations were “removed” from Penn’s Woods centuries ago, this course is a valuable reintroduction of indigenous cultures and history for recent European immigrants to Pennsylvania, especially students and faculty who have had little exposure to the hidden history of their own region. Because local knowledge is a defining tenet of indigenous knowledge, this two-part course explores indigenous ways of knowing in the Great Lakes region followed by a two to three week cultural engagement experience on the three largest Ojibwe nations in North America—Red Lake, Leech Lake, and White Earth Nations.

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Growing up on the Northwest Angle, Lake of the Woods, Minnesota, I gained an early appreciation for the cultural values embedded in the language and traditions of the Ojibwe people. Through engagement with Ojibwe friends and neighbors, I lived daily with the stark contrasts between the dominant Western/Euro-American and indigenous/Ojibwe worldviews. I learned to respect Ojibwe generosity, endurance, and resilience in coping with centuries of historical trauma, much of which was the result of Western educational models and systems. It was my engagement with Ojibwe people and their lifeways that helped me to understand and appreciate their worldview in particular and indigenous ways of knowing in general. The richness of this personal experience enables me to see more clearly the importance of engagement as the key to learning about and understanding the indigenous people of the Great Lakes region.

I have been involved in cultural education for many years. Exploring Indigenous Ways of Knowing among the Ojibwe began to take shape in 2000 when I organized a three week cross-cultural seminar for twenty-five students from another eastern university to visit Ojibwe communities in Minnesota, Ontario, and Manitoba. This seminar was followed by a cultural engagement experience among the Inupiaq people of the Kotzebue region of Alaska along the Chukchi Sea. Both experiences confirmed my childhood education among the Ojibwe of the Lake of the Woods. By this time, I had spent more than fifteen years in eastern universities and felt strongly that indigenous peoples and their ways of knowing would always be misunderstood and even endangered as long as universities continued to introduce students to indigenous peoples' history and culture in classrooms, through texts, and occasional videos. This unengaged and extractive model of education too often reinforces the negative historical and cultural stereotypes about indigenous people that are perpetuated by the intractable, assimilationist educational methods and objectives of dominant Western culture. These forces were clearly damaging to indigenous students who were extracted to university campuses and also reinforced simplistic and inaccurate views of indigenous people in the minds of Euro-American students.

There had to be a better and different way for students and faculty to understand and appreciate indigenous peoples and their rich cultural contributions to

knowledge, past and present. Due to historical circumstances and geographical marginalization, most Americans have had little exposure to indigenous people and their ways of knowing. I structured this course to change these facts and to reverse the damage being done--usually unwittingly--by our Euro-American educational methods and objectives. The key for me in developing this course was learning through engagement.

Engagement is becoming an important, even fashionable, educational philosophy and tool in academic settings. But this term directed my approach to indigenous education long before it was fashionable because it expressed the heart and soul of indigenous education, of learning and knowing. “Cultural engagement” rather than “field experience” more accurately expresses the pedagogical method and goal of the Maymester course—*Exploring Indigenous Ways of Knowing among the Ojibwe*. Five key themes or tenets of IK—local knowledge, relational knowledge, empirical knowledge, spiritual knowledge, and traditional knowledge—are explored in this course. These themes, the framework of an indigenous worldview, provide the framework for the winter semester course and the Maymester cultural engagement. These themes and values are deeply embedded in indigenous languages and cultures, interwoven to form a coherent and meaningful worldview. Learning, or education, for indigenous people is an engagement experience because it is based on the important theme or core value of relationship. Knowledge and knowledge production for indigenous people is a socially mediated and engaged experience rather than a solitary enterprise. Relational knowing implies engagement with subjects rather than objects or even ideas in the experienced and known (local) world. In the indigenous way of knowing, all knowledge is local, requires touching the earth, and is derived from engagement with other living beings.

Ozaawagosh, from the Lac Du Flambeau Nation, writes, “Trees are...living relatives of the Anishinaabeg, and the bark is considered a gift. Anishinaabeg do the appropriate ceremonies we have been taught when harvesting any of the gifts afforded our nation” (Wrobel 2015). The idea that the world of nature is a living being that is capable of relationships and communication is one of the most difficult aspects of indigenous knowledge for Euro-Americans to understand. Another example may be helpful. Finding and catching fish is a practiced ritual for the Ojibwe people, as it was for me as a child growing up on the Northwest Angle. With no roads to the closest supermarket, which was eighty-five miles away,

fishing was a matter of survival for us and depended on a very highly developed set of skills, an intimate relationship with the lake, wind speed and direction, cloud cover, angle of light, season, water temperature, humidity, and additional factors. With their Ojibwe neighbors, my parents would often gather at the lakeshore at the appointed hour to “read the lake,” or take their bearings, before going fishing. They listened to the wind in the poplars, studied the textures and colors of the water, noted the wave action, felt the moisture content of the air, observed the type and movement of the clouds, and much more. They talked among themselves, compared readings, discussed their memories, and watched and listened some more. Sometimes *kinnikinnick* (red willow tobacco) would be offered silently or with words to the spirit/life of the lake, gratitude for the relationship, for the gift of knowledge, and for the fish to be given. This reading of the natural world, devoid of modern technology and gadgets, depended on years and generations of relationship, experience, and respect. Finding and catching fish depended on finely tuned senses and skills developed through engagement with varied aspects and conditions of the natural world, not on chance or magical thinking. Using modern sonar technology and equipment certainly would have resulted in greater precision and efficiency in locating and catching fish. However, such productivity has also resulted in a broken relationship with the lake, the fish, and the natural world, a relationship more easily broken than repaired.

Engagement as relational knowing is key to the structure and dynamic of both the spring (CED 400) and the Maymester (CED 401) courses. The spring course, which takes place in a media-equipped classroom, uses the indigenous talking circle as an engagement tool to discuss and reflect on the five themes highlighted earlier and also to prepare students for a deeper learning experience in Ojibwe country. Following the spring semester course, students travel during the Maymester to the three largest Ojibwe communities in Northern Minnesota to learn *with* and *from* twenty to thirty Ojibwe elders, educators, ceremonial leaders, medicine men/women, artists, political leaders, and other enrolled community members. Take note of the prepositions *with* and *from*; they reveal the structure of the course and the meaning of engagement as a relational educational model. The course is not designed to provide information *about* indigenous knowledge or Ojibwe culture (though this is inevitably an outcome). It is designed to bring students into *relationship through engagement* with each other and with Ojibwe knowledge holders. It is designed to move them from a complacent, unengaged

Western educational tradition to a robust, relational and engaged indigenous educational tradition of learning and knowing. One of the objectives of the course is to help students understand that relationship in this model is not limited to humans but extends to the land, wind, clouds, lakes, rivers, rocks, forests, plants, and all creatures great and small. Because relationship is the key to learning in indigenous communities, students are introduced to traditional knowledge holders in Ojibwe communities, where knowledge has been produced and transmitted from generation to generation for thousands of years. Exploring and learning occurs in the context of relationships with elders and educators (knowledge holders), on their lands, in their communities, through their lifeways, in their ceremonies and traditions, and with their family members. Engagement makes possible the relationships necessary for learning and knowing in indigenous communities.

An important aspect of this indigenous approach to learning and knowing is that it democratizes the educational process. Students or faculty members who have been educated in the Western and European traditions are present, not as experts, but as mutual learners. There are different worldviews and different ways of knowing. In this course, engagement implies epistemological equality, mutuality, reciprocity, and respect for all worldviews and ways of knowing. This approach creates space for mutuality—openness, change, humility, and respect. More importantly for the design of this course, it allows both indigenous people and knowledge their rightful place in the educational process, which produces a truly democratic educational experience. Ojibwe knowledge holders, particularly those who have received a traditional indigenous education, are engaged and valued in the learning process. The design of this course provides indigenous knowledge holders with opportunities to pass on what they know to a society that has trivialized, marginalized, and eradicated indigenous knowledge for centuries.

Cultural engagement not only introduces students to a more democratic and socially mediated approach to learning, it opens them to personal growth and transformation. It introduces them to fundamental questions about their own worldviews and the assumptions that support it. It prepares them to become engaged learners for life. Learning through engagement does not end when students of Exploring Indigenous Ways of Knowing among the Ojibwe return to the university campus. Even in relationship to indigenous knowledge, the learning continues. Students who have taken this course often return to Ojibwe country to work in Native communities and to do qualitative research projects with elders,

educators, and traditional knowledge holders. For example, a recent student met with traditional elders to design and produce a healing jingle dress, a dress that is now danced annually at the Intertribal Powwow in Cass Lake. Many other students have served as summer interns with Winona LaDuke and Native Harvest in Calloway. A recent class member served as an intern with Native Legal Services in Lakota Country, Pierre, South Dakota. Yet another graduate student in art education returned to Ojibwe country for two consecutive summers to do art education research with and among traditional artists. His project produced a doctoral dissertation. Another graduate student returned to Red Lake to assist the tribe in developing a plan to promote and assist entrepreneurs and small business owners. Others have simply returned to Ponemah or Cass Lake to maintain or deepen established respectful relationships and to continue to expand their understanding of indigenous and Ojibwe ways of knowing. The complete list of the engaged scholarship that this course has produced would be very long indeed. My point is simply this: engagement as an educational model, particularly important in indigenous communities, produces students who are more likely to become engaged in learning as a life-long endeavor.

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The Interinstitutional Center for Indigenous Knowledge (ICIK) is administered by the University Libraries and was engaged in the process of establishing an academic home for the Ojibwe engagement course, which has provided the opportunity for many departments within the Libraries to focus on indigenous knowledge in general and the knowledge of Native peoples of the Americas in particular. Helen Sheehy, Social Sciences and Maps Librarian, and Amy Paster, Life Sciences Librarian, have provided leadership to initiate an online, peer-reviewed, open access journal, IK: Other Ways of Knowing. This new PSU Libraries publication reflects the commitment of the Libraries to facilitate and reinforce the engaged learning experiences of students enrolled in Exploring Indigenous Ways of Knowing in the Great Lakes Region and Exploring Indigenous Ways of Knowing among the Ojibwe. Helen Sheehy and Nonny Schlotzhauer describe the role of the Penn State Libraries in the new Ojibwe course.

The Penn State Libraries play a central role in the academic life of students across all disciplines, from basic introductory courses to graduate level research seminars. With the increasingly complex nature of research, students need practical skills to discover, utilize, and analyze the abundance of resources at their disposal in order to make the most of their study on any particular topic. Yet, equally important is the philosophical understanding of the nature of information: how it develops, the ways in which it is synthesized, how it is “classified,” and how a dominant culture affects the acquisition, access, and preservation of knowledge in libraries. In this respect, the courses Exploring Indigenous Ways of Knowing in the Great Lakes Region and Exploring Indigenous Ways of Knowing among the Ojibwe provide a perfect opportunity to explore both the practical and the philosophical aspects of library research.

A core objective of the course is to provide an introduction to the distinctive ways indigenous people experience, understand, and know their world and the land to which they belong. As the CED 400 course was conceived, it was deemed important that students gain a firm grounding in the use of library resources as a means to grasp the historical, social, and material aspects of IK, and to be able to conduct research to support a short paper, required for the course. Nonetheless, as Dr. Martin points out, students were encouraged to explore, understand, and engage with indigenous knowledge and the course as a complete “learning endeavor.” In practical terms, as librarians, we set out to introduce students to the wealth of information accessible through the Libraries, including a review of the current principles and practice of library research. In CED 400, a three hour session provides a succinct yet comprehensive review of indigenous knowledge inquiry and assessment by covering an array of materials, including comprehensive subject databases, multimedia resources, archival sources, and books and journals.

Perhaps the most interesting component of our contribution to the Ojibwe course is coverage of the production, ownership, and classification of knowledge. We believe it is imperative to cover the implications of Western library practices on the collection and preservation—or lack of collection and preservation—of indigenous knowledge. We begin with a discussion about the role libraries play in forming our understanding of indigenous culture and knowledge and how, as stewards of so much “cultural heritage” that gets passed down through the years, the library becomes a filter that organizes, catalogs, and labels knowledge based upon a

classification system with a largely Western worldview. Through examples such as subject headings and call numbers, we challenge the students to think about how the world's cultures and bodies of knowledge are very much social constructs and most often reflect the views of those who acquire them rather than of the indigenous peoples who produce them. And, we discuss recent attempts by the library community to become more culturally responsive by providing opportunities for indigenous communities to have a greater say in the way traditional knowledge is portrayed and circulated. As a talking point, we provide an overview of the impetus and history of the Protocols for Native American Archival Materials (PNAAM), which recommends best practices for dealing with Native American traditional cultural expressions and indigenous knowledge held in libraries and archives.

Finally, we very briefly explore the concept of intellectual property, such as copyright and patents, as a purely Western construct and the evolving legal landscape of indigenous peoples' rights to traditional knowledge (ethnomedicine, ecological knowledge, etc.); cultural expression (art, music, dance, film, photographs, etc.); and genetic resources. The purpose of this discussion is to raise student awareness of initiatives such as the World Intellectual Property Organization's work on developing international legal instruments that negotiate the ownership and control of indigenous knowledge.

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The involvement of Outreach Extension is critical to the success of the Ojibwe courses that depend upon the unique qualification and teaching experience of Dr. Bruce Martin, who is employed by PSU as an adjunct instructor. Addressing the complex fiscal and managerial issues faced by the Ojibwe courses requires the involvement of PSU administrators, as well as faculty and staff, who are committed to a course that is highly valued by students, but would not fit comfortably into most academic departments. The Ojibwe course might not have been initiated at Penn State without the support of the (then) Interinstitutional Consortium for Indigenous Knowledge whose co-directors, Dr. Ladislaus Semali and Dr. Audrey Maretzki, arranged for the course to be offered experimentally as CIED 497 in the College of Education and co-listed in the College of Agricultural Sciences as AG

497. PSU policy permits new courses to remain “experimental” for only two years before being submitted to review by the PSU Curriculum Committee. However, the positive student response and modest changes to the course resulted in its continuation with a 497 (experimental) designation for more than a decade before a permanent academic home for the course was identified.

A brief administrative history of the Ojibwe course is provided by Jenifer O’Connor, Program Assistant at Conferences and Institutes, in collaboration with Kathleen Karchner who was a Program Manager in Conferences and Institutes (C&I) prior to her retirement in 2011.

Kathleen Karchner was introduced to the Ojibwe course by Avis Kunz in the Office of the Associate Dean in the College of Liberal Arts, who was unable to identify a home for Dr. Martin’s Ojibwe course. Karchner, however, was very enthusiastic about bringing the course to Conferences and Institutes (C&I) and met with Dr. Martin to learn about it, with the idea that the ICIK co-directors might know of a way for the course to be offered. The concept of an engaged indigenous knowledge course was warmly embraced by the ICIK co-directors, and the course was listed as CIED/AG 497 in 2004. Only a few students enrolled in the first year, but word spread rapidly, and by the second year, the course filled and it continued to grow, drawing both graduate and undergraduate students from across the University Park Campus for the next seven years, until, in 2011, thirty students traveled to Minnesota.

During those years, the Ojibwe course was offered as a spring semester course with several half or full-day sessions taught by Dr. Martin on one or two weekends during the semester, students then departed for Minnesota in University vans on the day after spring graduation. Students had the option of taking the course for three to six credits, with readings and additional activities assigned in proportion to the number of credits elected. Course tuition was included in the students’ spring semester payment, with virtually all students being full-time. The tasks of C&I included establishing the course budget, getting the course on the Schedule of Courses, reserving fleet vehicles, processing lodging contracts, enrolling students approved by Martin, monitoring tuition and course fee payments, paying course bills and travel expenses, getting honoraria checks for the many instructors in Minnesota, and other small details. Additionally, CI answered many calls and e-mails from students and their families.

In 2008, Karchner successfully nominated Exploring Indigenous Ways of Knowing among the Ojibwe and its instructor for the prestigious Rose Duhon-Sells Program Award, presented at the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME) Conference in New Orleans. Ms. Duhon Sells is the founder of NAME, and the eponymous award recognizes a program's outstanding contribution to multicultural education. At the time, Dr. Martin said: "This course immerses students in Ojibwe culture where they learn Ojibwe lifeways and worldview from more than twenty-five Ojibwe educators, political leaders, spiritual leaders, and traditional knowledge holders. This award should be shared by the sovereign Red Lake, Leech Lake, and White Earth nations."

In 2012, misfortune befell the Ojibwe course. Karchner, a champion for the program, had recently retired and, for reasons we did not understand, the course was offered solely through the College of Education. To make matters worse, new student financial aid restrictions were imposed, meaning that the spring semester Ojibwe course could no longer involve students in activities that took part after spring graduation. The time frame for travel to Ojibwe country is based on traditional ceremonies and celebrations that are seasonal and take place during the newly instituted portion of the summer semester called "Maymester." To take part in the engagement portion of the Ojibwe course, students, most of whom did not qualify for financial aid in summer, were required to pay summer session tuition in addition to the customary course fees. Not only was there a logistical dilemma about how Dr. Martin would prepare students for their visit to Ojibwe country, but also a financial crisis occurred when students received a bill for their regular tuition as well as summer session tuition and the Ojibwe course fees. Many students dropped the class, but a sufficient number remained to run the "Ojibwe engagement experience" segment only. In 2013, a three credit Maymester-only Ojibwe course was scheduled, but the out-of-pocket costs were prohibitive, and for the first time since 2004, the course was cancelled due to low enrollment.

The cancellation of the 2013 Ojibwe course was a call for action on the part of involved faculty and staff in the College of Agricultural Sciences, College of Liberal Arts, PSU Libraries, and Conferences and Institutes. Professor Leland Glenna, of the College of Agricultural Sciences, had experience with Maymester courses and was willing to consider providing an academic home for the Ojibwe course in the Community, Environment, and Development Program. Dr. Martin was willing to redesign and teach a 2.5 credit spring semester course via Skype that

included a field trip to the Carlisle Indian Industrial School. Danna Seballos, with administrative experience in *The World in Conversation*, was willing to serve as Martin's Teaching Assistant for both the on-campus prerequisite course and the independent 0.5 credit Maymester Ojibwe engagement. With Helen Sheehy's willingness and ability to include the Ojibwe course on the ICIK website in the PSU Libraries, the costs to the program budget were significantly reduced. With everyone's determination to keep the Ojibwe course on the books, fortunes changed and the course was back in action in 2014 with Professor Emerita Maretzki filling in for Professor Glenna during the spring semester while he was on sabbatical leave in Ireland.

In fall 2014, a proposal by Professor Glenna to make permanent both Exploring Indigenous Ways of Knowing in the Great Lakes Region and Exploring Indigenous Ways of Knowing among the Ojibwe was placed on the desk of Dr. Tracy Hoover, Associate Dean for Undergraduate Instruction in the College of Agricultural Sciences, by her administrative assistant, Kathy Pletcher--coincidentally a Bad River Band Ojibwe. With the support of Dean Hoover, the proposals were submitted through the College Curriculum Committee and then to the PSU Curriculum Committee. Just before spring graduation in May 2015, the proposed courses were approved as CED 400 and CED 401. To the proponents of this life-changing course, this was an academic miracle!

Jenifer notes, "As I prepare for retirement at the end of 2015, I can reflect on the many struggles, obstacles, and policies that seemed to conspire against our efforts to keep this program going. I was inspired by the Serenity Prayer: 'Grant us the courage to change the things we can.' The Ojibwe program can change lives!"

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In ending, we hear from Dr. Leland Glenna, the faculty member who championed the Ojibwe course and has provided it with an academic home in the Community, Environment, and Development major. Therefore, creating the opportunity for undergraduate and graduate students throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and beyond, majoring in any field of study, to broaden their perspective on what it means "to know."

The Ojibwe course is an important contribution to the Community, Environment, and Development (CED) major. Critical thinking is a central component of the CED major, but that critical thinking is taught from within a Western, rational, modern science context. For example, students are likely to learn in their classes how to compare and contrast deductive and inductive approaches and how to research, compare, and contrast utilitarian, libertarian, and Kantian perspectives behind various policy assessments or prescriptions. By introducing students to an indigenous knowledge system, however, the courses, Exploring Indigenous Ways of Knowing in the Great Lakes Region and Exploring Indigenous Knowledge among the Ojibwe, offer radically different ways to think about what passes for knowledge and what is appropriate for interacting with people and with nature.

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To learn more about the Penn State Ojibwe courses, visit agsci.psu.edu/ojibwe.

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