

Learning Around the Camp Fire: Developing Xàgots'eèhk'ò

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, three scholars involved with the development of the journal share their insights and experiences. A vision for a new, online, and open access Northern journal was created through inclusive and collaborative meetings between Knowledge Holders, Elders, youth, and scholars. This allowed for the sharing of diverse knowledges, perspectives and experiences and led to the identification of the grounding concept of a campfire as a place where Northerners share knowledges. This is the intention behind Xàgots'eèhk'ò, a new journal by and for Northerners.

INTRODUCTION

Although the idea of developing a journal in the Northwest Territories (NWT) had been discussed for many years, work towards the creation of a journal concept, structure, and processes began in 2020 with a successful grant application to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). Potential participants were identified and invited through the networks of SSHRC grant partner organizations. These included Dechinta Centre for Research and Learning and Hotii ts'eeda. This paper shares the process of the creation of Xàgots'eèhk'ò Journal from the perspective of three scholars involved. Through a series of meetings with Indigenous and non-Indigenous Northerners, participants identified themes, concepts, and processes to take forward into the journal. In these meetings, we¹ heard aspirations for creating a journal that provides a vibrant space for Northerners to share and generate knowledge. The need for a journal that brings people together, fills a gap by creating a vehicle for knowledge mobilization, and where creativity and knowledge exchange among Northerners occurs was communicated. Indigenous leaders described the need for a space where Indigenous voice reverberates; students, scholars and Elders are celebrated; and many diverse modalities of knowledge expression and interpretation are revealed.

¹ Use of the term "we" reflects the authors perspective developed in collaboration with many stakeholders, Elders and Knowledge Holders. This term is not meant to assume ownership by the authors of the process but rather identify the inclusive nature of the journal. In addition, verbatim quotes highlight the shared process of co-learning and co-development in the creation of the journal. Consent for using these quotes was received from all and with one participant an anonymous notation was agreed.

Drawing on the name of the journal, Xàgots'eèhk'ò, which means “having a campfire” in the Tłı̨chǝ language, this paper uses a campfire as a metaphor for the process of this journal’s development (Figure 1). We describe the steps that led to the inaugural issue through the process of starting a campfire. Beginning with the intent to create warmth to sustain Northerners by starting the campfire (describing ways of knowing and foundations of the journal), we proceed to collecting the firewood (creating structures and guidelines for the journal), and stoking the fire (seeking, reviewing, and accepting submissions).



FIGURE 1

Developing Xàgots'eèhk'ò

STARTING THE CAMPFIRE

The campfire could be lit once SSHRC funding was secured in December 2020. A journal coordinator was hired (Janat Ibrahim) to coordinate the journal development process. A diverse group of Tłı̨chǝ Elders, Knowledge Holders, Northern students, and Indigenous and Non-Indigenous scholars with diverse backgrounds, expertise, and knowledge from across the territory were invited to attend a virtual gathering on April 14, 2021. The purpose of this gathering was to have a conversation about how Northern and Indigenous Peoples share information and how these processes can be integrated into the journal. A discussion paper was written prior to the initial meeting that reviewed potential concepts from the published literature reported to be culturally congruent and that could stoke the fire leading to a viable vision and scope (Lemky et al., 2021). These conceptual ideas included respect, reciprocity, relevance, responsibility, reverence, anti-racist and sex and gender diversity.

Twenty-three people attended to share their insights and opinions at the first gathering. Two further gatherings were held on May 20, 2021, and November 25, 2021. These gatherings were a chance to discuss initial journal development and ensure that work being done resonated with this group of people. As the structure of the journal came together, we began to refer to this group as an “Advisory Committee” – a group of knowledgeable Northerners who could inform and guide the journal as it was developed

From these gatherings a number of key journal elements were identified. In conversation about how Northerners share information, the space of a campfire was raised and discussed during the second workshop where we engaged in discussion of a draft vision statement for the journal. The group was invited to brainstorm important concepts relevant to Northern Indigenous peoples that should be included in the vision. A campfire, specifically, was described as a place where knowledge transmission happens through storytelling:

“The more campfires you have, the more knowledge you get by telling stories and feeding the fire” (Zoe, 2021a).

Rosa Mantla (2021a) identified the Tłıchǫ concept of Xàgots’eèhk’ò or having a campfire. To further understand the importance of having a campfire to Tłıchǫ people, we interviewed Rosa Mantla, an Elder and Tłıchǫ culture and language expert from Behchokǫ:

“A fire that you see on the land, or in a teepee, or outside a person’s house, it draws people in. When we have a fire outside my house too, people come... Sometimes they ask for food, sometimes they help themselves. Fire is special because it is spiritual. People stand around a fire, and inhale the warmth, the smoke, and they feel the heat” (Mantla, 2021b).

Rosa’s contributions have been an integral part to the development of this journal. With Rosa’s language expertise, we have been able to correctly identify the Tłıchǫ term for having a campfire, Xàgots’eèhk’ò. Xàgots’eèhk’ò was decided as the name for the journal.

Use of Tłıchǫ rather than any other of the eight Indigenous languages in the NWT was decided primarily because much of the discussion for the name occurred with Tłıchǫ speaking people. Before finalizing the name for the journal, we needed to ensure that ‘having a campfire’ was significant to Indigenous communities outside of the Tłıchǫ, as this journal was meant to be a space for all Northerners. We were honored to hear back from a Gwich’in Elder, Joanne Snowshoe. In the Gwich’in language, Kwàn’ Deek’it means fireplace:

“Gwich’in people use to tell stories by the campfire a long time ago. My mom and auntie Rebecca used to make dry fish, while the children used to cut the fish heads off, while that they tell stories and there used to be a fire. Sometimes people used to laugh so hard when telling stories. When they go up to the mountains, on sundays, people use to talk and tell stories and be singing hymns all day because they did not work on Sundays [and would spend time] by the stove or in tents. In Aklavik, where the school used to be, the Inuvialuit used to have tents and they would be cooking fish, telling stories and women used [to] even sew around the fire. In Tsiigehtchic, people used to go on the flats and have a big fish house and women used to be telling stories. When women used to cut fish in the summer, inside the fish house would be a fire. There would be a stone pot by the fire and there would be hot coals where people used to clean fish pipes and coney stockings and put [them] on the coals to cook slowly. While they are working, the food cooked slowly, and it cooked really good, and they had a good meal after it [was] cook[ed]” (Snowshoe, 2021)

Furthermore, fire is significant to the Inuit people in order to light the quilliq, a traditional oil lamp that was used to heat the home and for cooking (Walton & O'Leary, 2015). The quilliq is a tradition of the Inuit people and one that also signifies fire as meaningful.

Others in attendance at our initial meetings spoke about gathering around a campfire as a space for sharing stories, a way that Indigenous knowledge is generated, translated, and preserved by Elders as knowledge keepers. Scholars have written about storytelling around a campfire as a source of knowledge exchange for Indigenous peoples (Archibald, 2008; Hausknecht et al., 2021). Narratives in Indigenous communities serve as a tool to transmit knowledge (Archibald, 2008; Hausknecht et al., 2021, Scott, 2012), and as a research methodology (Archibald, 2008; Cruikshank, 1990; Datta, 2018; Kovach, 2009; Rieger et al., 2021). Storytelling is also described as a “pedagogical tool for learning life lessons” (Iseke, 2013 p. 565), whereby storytellers share knowledge through visiting the past, present, and future; and listeners create new connections for themselves in understanding the story. Having a campfire and gathering to share knowledge around it is also an experience that resonates with non-Indigenous Northerners. The campfire, then, can be a space to come together.

Those involved in developing foundational journal concepts at the initial meetings agreed that the journal must be accessible to everyone. This means that the journal editorial and publication processes need to be mindful of language. Often, authors who publish in peer-reviewed journals use difficult scholarly language that can be exclusionary. One participant in the initial meetings explained how Indigenous languages should be included in order to be truly Northern based and inclusive of Indigenous and non-Indigenous contributors:

“We have eleven official languages and I notice English, and French are always there but I don't see the nine Indigenous languages so I would really love to have either an audio clip or abstract to ensure that Indigenous languages are included. If [this journal is] going to be Northern and Indigenous then it should be really representative” (Lemky, 2021).

Inviting submissions in Indigenous languages is especially important in spaces such as this journal which seeks to share, strengthen, and celebrate Northern peoples' relationships to land, languages, cultures, and way of life. Tł̨chq̨ Elder Rosa Mantla describes the importance of language in her thesis:

“Languages are spiritual and powerful. They are sacred, beautiful, pretty, and cute, especially when they are spoken from the heart. Languages are amusing. Language can be a habit of speaking, entertaining whether loud or whispering. Languages are colourful and very lively. The joyful sounds of various languages fill the air with jokes and teasing. Let's go forward with the gift of languages. Let's embrace our world with languages and pass them on to all those who will fill up their ʔq̨tsi (packing bag). We have to love all languages from the heart and body to respect, cherish and speak our mother tongue every day. We have to accept all languages because they are all creations of mother earth that gave us the words from the soil” (Mantla 2017, p. 69).

Participants involved in journal development meetings also shared that accessibility means openness in terms of genre or type of submission. Art-based forms often allow for creativity in self-expression that written forms sometimes cannot and this extends the possibilities for authorship and accessibility. Participants recommended the journal represent multiple forms of communication, including art and storytelling. One participant described this as “the integration of multi-modal approaches to learning including art forms, oral forms (through video and audio), and text-based research” (Soanes-White, 2021). This meant looking beyond accepting only written scholarly publications towards creating a journal that invites knowledge sharing in many possible forms.

Considerations of ethical practice and support for Indigenous sovereignty was incorporated throughout the entire discussion, particularly when discussing knowledge in an online, open access format. One participant cautioned about the potential for published work to harm rather than strengthen Northern peoples:

“The nature of the research that we do is always very relevant but is also highly sensitive. When we think about modern land claims and about the status of court cases, all of our research is definitely relevant to ongoing processes of justice with the colonial settler state and how we come to think about and exercise our sovereignty as a nation in the North” (Fraser, 2021).

These conversations led to the understanding that journal processes must include Indigenous Peoples and those with lived experiences and knowledge alongside scholarly knowledge and expertise. Article 18 of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) emphasizes the importance of Indigenous participation in “decision-making in matters which would affect their rights” (United Nations, 2007, pp. 15-16); and the need to “revitalize, use, develop and transmit to future generations their histories, writing systems and literatures, and to designate and retain their own names for communities, places and person” (United Nations, 2007, pp. 12-13). Going forward, this includes the composition of the Editorial Committee for the journal, the choice of co-editors for each issue, the review process developed, and the request for a cover letter from contributors to invite them to explain the significance of their work and relevance to the journal, the relationship of authors to the Indigenous contexts, and the benefits of the research/work for the collaborating Indigenous community.

Participants in initial journal development meetings also stressed the need for inclusivity in readership and authorship. Although universities and colleges across Canada have responded to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s Calls to Action (2015) with implementation of Indigenization strategies, Indigenous knowledge systems are not always welcomed in academic spaces. One participant described their experience as a graduate student:

“One thing I’ve really struggled with is the methodology of my research and having to defend and prove why using an Indigenous paradigm and Indigenous research methods are valid and credible. I actually used the 4R approach to show that my data collection and analysis were valid and credible from an Indigenous perspective by showing respect, responsibility, and how it was relevant throughout the process” (Ens, 2021).

Ensuring inclusivity can mean to ensure a focus on strengths which celebrates Indigenous and Northern peoples. As one participant explained, “Use a strength-based perspective rather than focusing on problems that need to be solved” (Anonymous, 2021).

This orientation towards inclusivity extends to knowledges and initial meeting participants stressed the importance of working across Indigenous and non-Indigenous knowledge systems. As John B. Zoe said,

“What we are talking about is a learning institution concentrated on the future generation; and that is where the North and the West meets together. For Northern Indigenous people[s], it’s about knowledge transfer, and for the West, it’s about skill development. So how do we fuse those things together? We’re talking about a journal that’s going to recognize that form of fusion” (Zoe, 2021b).

Indigenous scholars and leaders have proposed frameworks for working across knowledge systems. For example, Two-Eyed Seeing, as proposed by Mik'maw Elder Albert Marshall in 2004, refers to acknowledging and using the strengths and ways of knowing of both Indigenous knowledges and Western knowledges (Bartlett et al., 2012). Strong Like Two People is a philosophy shared by Tłıchq Elder, Elizabeth Mackenzie, referring to the words of Chief Jimmy Bruneau. Strong Like Two People draws from two knowledge systems, Western and Tłıchq worldviews, while retaining Tłıchq cultural identity, practices, and traditions (Bruneau, 1971; Mackenzie, 1990; Dogrib Divisional Board of Education, 1991). Antoine Mountain expanded upon this by stating:

“Yes, we were given numbers [at residential school] ... we must get beyond that...Tradition is what we call it. Respecting each other's boundaries. The Dene way is not categorizing but is “Strong like two People”” (Mountain, 2021).

To honour and mobilize Indigenous and Western knowledge systems, participants stressed the importance of implementing decolonizing approaches in the journal (Battiste, 2013; McGibbon et al., 2014; Moffitt, 2016; Smith, 2012; Zappas et al., 2020). This means being critical with openness and humility and deconstructing racist and colonial notions embedded in our narratives, our processes and practices, and ongoing consideration of power and privilege “to get the story right and tell the story well” (Battiste, 2013, p. 226). This section has described the foundational concepts identified by journal advisors, these include identification of the orienting concept of Xàgots'eèhk'ò or having a campfire and the importance of accessibility, ethics, and inclusivity in working across knowledge systems. Indigenous and non-Indigenous Northerners who attended three meetings identified these concepts to guide development and decision making.

Starting the campfire required all of these worldviews, principles, and themes for development so that the fire would ignite and its flame shine brightly; but the fire needed fuel to be sustained.

COLLECTING FIREWOOD

To fuel a campfire, someone needs to collect the firewood. Others may be involved in deciding what kind of wood to use, selecting a location for the campfire, and inviting and welcoming people to gather around it. Similarly, in creating a journal, firewood was gathered throughout the territory by engaging with a broad spectrum of interested community members, encouraging everyone to feel welcome at our campfire and to contribute to the creation of the journal. Participants in initial meetings were invited to join several committees to finalize the vision and scope of the journal based on the initial meetings, choose a logo for the journal, create the editorial committee, review roles and processes, seek options for online and open access publication, and look towards the journal's launch. The realities of collaborating with a diverse group of people online led to challenges; however, we remained committed to our spirit of dialogue and inquiry, and we made adjustments when needed. We learned by doing and by learning from each other. Antoine Mountain reminded us that:

“We learned how to do things by watching an Elder and then demonstrating it back. You got your kindling, your matches, but you need lots of air. There are lots of things to attend to” (Mountain, 2021).

One part of thinking about stoking the fire was the development of a vision statement that would embody the meaning of the journal. It is all around us but how are we using it? The vision and scope committee created vision statements out of the foundational concepts and principles discussed in initial meetings. Creation of a vision statement, like other components of this journal, was an iterative, evolving process. Each discussion led to changes to the vision statement, which currently reads:

“This journal is a space to exchange stories and unify Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and artists regardless of regional boundaries in their goal of further strengthening and sharing Northern Peoples’ relationships to land, language, culture, and ways of life.” (Xàgots’eèhk’ò Journal, n.d.)

Once a name and vision were created for the journal, a logo committee invited Northerners to participate in a contest that offered a cash prize for the winning artwork. The logo contest offered participants freedom to be creative; the only real criteria was that it must represent our vision statement. The winning logo was created by Aidan Cartwright, with input from Simone Tielish, both Yellowknife residents. Aidan described the logo as follows:

“The overlaid sticks are the foundation of the fire, representing collaboration and cooperation between distinct entities with a common purpose. (LAND)

The two flames of the fire are representative of learners, scholars, youth, and Elders. The one with greater knowledge is the larger flame and the learner or student is the smaller flame. Eventually the smaller flame becomes the larger flame through experience, an example of the cycle of learning and knowledge-sharing. (CULTURE)

The rings of light emanating from the fire are representative of what comes from knowledge sharing – stories, research, philosophy, and art. (WAYS OF LIVING)” (Xàgots’eèhk’ò Journal, n.d.)”

An editorial committee was formed to create submission, editorial, and publication processes for the journal. This group worked to create submission guidelines, develop the theme for the first issue, choose co-editors, and extend calls for submissions publicly and through editorial committee member’s individual professional and personal networks. The editorial committee was also responsible for deciding upon and setting up a website for the journal. Finally, the editorial committee accepted and reviewed all submissions and developed the first steps towards a relational review process. Creation of vision, editorial committee, choosing a theme for the first issue, and innovating first steps towards a relational review process were instrumental to building the campfire. It allowed for the firewood to be laid, and the foundational structure for the campfire to be in place before the sparks flew.

STOKING THE CAMP FIRE

Keeping the campfire burning means constant rekindling, attending to the draft, and adjusting the placement of the firewood to allow the flame to grow. For the first issue, the editorial committee chose the theme of “Education in the North.” When deciding on this topic, we had to consider the purpose and target audience of the journal. The importance of youth was raised frequently in not only our larger workshops, but in most of our discussions within the smaller committees. Elders and scholars emphasized how youth were vital to the success of this journal, often referenced as the target audience. They are viewed as the fuel to keeping the campfire burning. To many of the participants this journal is considered a strengthening exercise built by Northerners. This journal issue is meant to engage youth and help them build capacity for education and learning in the North, rather than seek educational opportunities outside of the North. As Aurora College expands into a Polytechnic University in the upcoming years, there will be further opportunity for Northern youth to stay in the North for post-secondary education; a point mentioned often in our journal advisory meetings.

We aimed for an embedded relationship in Xàgots'eèhk'ò to grow a journal that was respectful, relational, relevant, responsible, and reciprocal – one that strengthens the relationship to land, culture, and way of life. We welcomed submissions that were representative of all forms of knowledge production, including narrative, art, audio, visual, poetry, and video. Then, we envisioned a review process that would be interactive and iterative and provide a culturally safe yet rigorous space to mobilize ideas and perspectives (Moffitt & Durnford, 2021). Indeed, peer-review may not be appropriate for all forms of knowledge. The use of peer-review for Indigenous methodology was a concern raised in initial meetings. As one participant explained, “Community based knowledge does not have any merit in the peer-review process. It’s disrespectful to even question someone’s experience or knowledge” (Anonymous, 2021). Instead, we sought to develop a review process to acknowledge the validity of Indigenous methodology and ontologies. As well, rather than reviewing with an objective gaze and a place of anonymity, we assess submissions from a place of subjectivity, that is, where knowledge is shaped and understood by our environment, our relationships with each other and who we are as people of the North. When we talk about fit in this regard, it is a place for all around the fire. When we anticipate positionality, it is one of sharing and coming to know each other in new forms of scholarship. With this type of review, we embrace cultural humility.

For the journal, this meant being flexible as submissions were received and sent for review. Submissions were initially accepted for the first issue in December 2020. This was later extended to April 2021, and then summer 2021. Review of all submissions was first done by editorial committee members, then by external community and scholarly reviewers – and in a variety of forums. Reviews have been completed via email, in meetings, via the journal website, and in one-on-one meetings. To get all submissions to publication, additional supports for copyediting, layout, and web development were needed. This was a collective and collaborative enterprise, led by the editorial committee, with many hands to stoke the fire and keep it burning.

CONCLUSION: SPARKS FLY

As we collected our wood and stoked the fire, sparks began to fly. From the current vision which included culture and a way of life, we sought the space where this occurred. Learning around the campfire is a metaphor to describe the processes and steps of developing an open-access journal by and for the peoples of our territory and other interested writers who share this vision. During the development of Xàgots'eèhk'ò, we practiced the principles founded for the journal. Knowledge production occurring from a heart-felt place of sharing in a good way and accounting for mindfulness in how and what we share. Involvement in this journal development has been an honoring and reflexive process for the authors and gave voice through verbatim quotes from the gathered participants.

This is just a beginning of what is hoped to be a long-standing source of knowledge sharing in the North. Envisioning and developing this journal has been an exercise in relationship building, participating in the journal development, and writing for the journal has been a learning experience for the authors. The opportunity to join with Northern Elders, Knowledge Holders, leaders, scholars, and artists has resulted in a journal that speaks to the campfire and the knowledge that exists within and among the strong and resilient people of the Northwest Territories. Respectful collaboration must remain the foundation of this work.

Janat Ibrahim is a settler from Southern Ontario who was living and working in Yellowknife to support the creation of the journal in 2021. Janat was actively involved in developing the integral components of the journal as the journal coordinator. She is a doctoral student at the University of Alberta.

Kerry Lynn Durnford is a settler living in Yellowknife for over 20 years. She is a nurse educator, researcher, and co-applicant on the SSHRC grant that funded journal development and the inaugural issue. She lives and works in Denendeh.

Pertice Moffitt is a settler and academic scholar from Yellowknife. She is a Northwest Territories health and social researcher in the field of women's health, Indigenous health, and rural and remote nursing. Pertice is the principal applicant for the SSHRC grant that funded journal development and the inaugural issue. She has lived and worked in Denendeh since 1990 and previously worked in the Inuvialuit region (1982 to 1986).

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