RELATIONAL ASSESSMENT GUIDE

a companion resource for the *Working in Good Ways* framework guide

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Community
Engaged Learning | University of Manitoba

HOW TO USE THIS GUIDE

Working in good ways with Indigenous communities means prioritizing our relationships with community partners and community members over settler-colonial and institutional expectations of professionalism, efficiency, and success.

Because we live, work, and learn within settler colonial systems, prioritizing relationship can be difficult—ongoing colonial violence continues to create deep-seated distrust, while outcomes-oriented frameworks for Indigenous community engagement are often counterproductive to the important work of building meaningful relationships with Indigenous communities.

Relational assessment is the practice of paying attention to our relationships and assessing their wellbeing – throughout their whole lifecycle, starting with the work before the work, moving through forming, maintaining, and closing partnerships, and continuing in the relationship after the work. In contrast to student assessment and program evaluation, which typically focus on learning outcomes and program impacts, relational assessment focuses on the health and quality of the relationships that underlie a partnership.

Relational assessment offers a way for us to actively care for our relationships with community—by engaging in meaningful conversations that build trust, creating space for people to provide feedback on how they experience the relationships we have with each other, and asking us to reflect critically about the ways in which our relationships evolve. Relational assessment requires intentional and thoughtful approaches that will help us to stay focused on what makes our work together valuable and enjoyable: the relationships we share with each other.

This guide is divided into four sections:

› Section 1 shares principles and practices for assessing relationships with Indigenous communities, which have been drawn from consultations with community partners and practitioners.

› Section 2 shares important questions for practitioner reflection, which cover all five stages of Indigenous community engagement but emphasize self-reflection in the work before the work and the relationship after the work. Getting into the habit of reflecting on these questions as part of our daily practice will help us to make the most of spontaneous opportunities to observe and notice changes on the health and evolution of our relationships, ask questions or respond to changes, take quiet actions to repair and support relationship-building, and engage in meaningful conversations with Indigenous partners.

› Section 3 shares important questions for partner conversation, which are also organized into the five stages, with a greater emphasis on assessment while forming, maintaining, and closing partnerships. These questions are meant to be explored in conversation or interaction with our partners, but it is good practice to do our own self-reflection in preparation for those conversations.

› Section 4 shares a selection of assessment resources that can be adapted to support practitioner reflection and partner conversations.

Please note: The question banks are not meant to be exhaustive, but rather a starting point from which you can draw inspiration for assessment within each stage of Indigenous community engagement. Together with your partners, select, adapt, and create assessment questions and activities that will be relevant, productive, and appropriate for the community and the context in which you are working.

SECTION 1:
PRINCIPLES AND PRACTICES

As you read through these principles, consider the following reflection questions:

› What are the benefits of following this principle?

› What are the consequences of not following this principle?

› What resistance do you feel about this principle?

› What challenges do you foresee and how can you overcome them?

Communicate to build trust

Meaningful and accurate relational assessments require trust. One of the most effective ways to build trust is through sincere, frequent communication that is personal, enjoyable, and goes beyond topics of work and partnership. In this sense, every time we check in with our community partners over text message, comment on their social media, or visit with them, we are building the trust required for accurate and meaningful relational assessment.

Pay attention by visiting

When we visit with communities, we can observe things that we might not otherwise see, hear, or feel. We can pay attention to who talks to us and who doesn't, what kinds of things we share with each other, whether there is laughter, anger, or gratitude, and more. These observations tell us a lot about our relationships with the community and how we can strengthen them. When we can't visit in-person, it's still important to find other ways to visit, such as through impromptu or scheduled phone calls or messages. Transportation and technology barriers are important considerations when implementing this practice with partners in remote, northern, or under-resourced communities. We may need to provide funding or support in order to make visiting possible.

> "It's called visiting, which can include information, storytelling, or sometimes even complaining... but it's almost always around food, home, and surrounding a sense of gift-giving. When there's laughter and teasing, that's when I know things are really humming, because my students are clearly making engagements with the community then."
>
> —Niigaan James Sinclair, Anishinaabe

Nurturing diverse relationships

Communities are made of many individuals and groups who each have their own perspectives and experiences. If we want to accurately assess our community engagement, we need to hear from as many voices as possible.

In institutional approaches to relationship-building, it is common to identify a limited number of formal partners with whom we spend time and collaborate — typically paid coordinators or other people whom we might see as having power and authority. The consultations demonstrated, however, that Indigenous community partners disagreed with this approach, believing that as many voices as possible should have an opportunity to build relationships and inform or be part of the partnership.

When Gerardo Villagrán Becerra started working with the Asociasion de Mujeres Parteras del Alto Napo (AMUPAKIN), he used to communicate exclusively with the midwives, even though the AMUPAKIN collective also included another self-organized group of youth who call themselves "the volunteers."

"It took me a couple of years to develop a relationship with the younger members of the collective. Everything the mamas do is ultimately for the volunteers, who are also their children, grandchildren, nieces, and nephews. During those initial two years, the mamas and I were planning and designing a program that could only partially benefit the youth because they were excluded from the spaces where we made decisions. It was actually the mamas who encouraged me to bring the youth into our planning meetings. The moment they entered that space, our program flourished—changing from a typical service-learning program into an arts-based knowledge exchange that allows all members of the community to take on rotational roles as co-creators, participants, and facilitators. Similarly, the way we assess our program has changed because it is no longer me, "the coordinator," interrogating the youth, but rather a conversation about the different perspectives and interests that shape our work together."

More importantly, if we are not engaging diverse community members and groups in relational assessment, it likely means that we are not doing a good job of caring for those relationships as part of our work with the community as a whole, and instead valuing and prioritizing relationships with some members and groups over others.

Learn more about cultivating diverse relationships by reading the chapter on Collaboration in the framework guide and using Mapping Diverse Relationships in the Practitioner Workbook.

Grow and evolve relationships and assessment together

Universities often decide what is important to measure or assess, and how to measure or assess it. To make sure that our assessment methods and approaches are appropriate to our relationships with Indigenous communities, we need to assess our assessment. This means, first and foremost, being aware that relational assessment is a changing and fluid process that requires reflection and adaptation each step of the way. The good news is that partners and practitioners shared a best practice for making sure we are using the most appropriate methods of assessment: ask our partners and the community members what methods and approaches they want to use and are most comfortable with.

We should tailor our relational assessment to the communities with whom we work, the kinds of relationships we have with our partners, and the depth and length of our relationships. For example, relational assessment of new partnerships may largely be informal, observational, and self-reflective. Practitioners and partners who have established trust with each other, on the other hand, might want to try assessment approaches that require more vulnerability and honesty.

It's important to remember that a particular method or approach that has worked in the past may not work again in the future. Relationships are constantly evolving: they may become closer or more distant, new faces may join the community while familiar faces step down or step into new roles, and circumstances in our own lives may lead to changes in our relationships. Ultimately, assessment is a dynamic process. The people who are involved, the questions and methods we use, and how we apply what we learn will change over time, along with the relationships we share with the community.

"Assessment methods depend on the individual or group and their communication style. What's effective in the moment? With a sharing circle, all are responsible for responding. There's an accountability to share."

—Brian Trewin, Northern Manitoba

SECTION 2: PRACTITIONER REFLECTION

Practitioner reflection can happen formally and informally, alone and with others. For some, this might be a journaling practice and debriefing with their project team, while for others it may be personal reflection on the commute home and visiting regularly with their Elder or mentor.

The important thing is to include time and space for reflection in your work and project. This includes dedicating time for reflection within planning processes, before and after engagement opportunities, and as part of our own identity development. Without intention and commitment, practitioner reflection is easily lost amidst the tasks and emails of project management, grant writing, and reporting.

> The Practitioner Workbook offers a collection of learning exercises that will support practitioner reflection, including Relational Introductions; Settler Colonial Privilege Inventory; Gifts, Impacts, and Roles; and Circle of Control.

Stage 1: The work before the work

› Who are you and where are you from?

› What is your motivation for working with Indigenous people and communities? How will you benefit from this work?

› What are your gifts and how might you be able to contribute to the community's work?

› What is your relationship to the Indigenous land where you currently live and work and to the people whose land you are occupying?

› How might people perceive you in the community? How can you earn trust?

› What will you do if there are community protocols that conflict with your personal values and beliefs?

› How will you introduce yourself to the community? What will you share about yourself?

› What do you know about Indigenous histories, cultures, and experiences in Canada? What do you know about the community with whom you want to work? What do you still need to learn?

› How are you developing your literacy in Indigenous content and learning about community engagement? Are you engaging in Indigenous ways of learning? Are you decentering yourself and prioritizing Indigenous participation as you learn?

› What has been the community's experience working with the University of Manitoba or other postsecondary institutions?

› How do you benefit from settler colonialism and how do your beliefs, values, and practices align with this ideology? How are you challenging these beliefs, values and practices?

› What biases and prejudices do you have about Indigenous peoples and how are you challenging anti-Indigenous racism in yourself and others?

› How will you debrief and reflect on what you have experienced, felt, and learned?

› How can you ensure that the community leads this period of relationship-building? How can you be honest and transparent about your intentions?

› Are you using this framework in a good way—with a genuine desire to develop meaningful relationships, listen and support community visions, and work in humble ways?
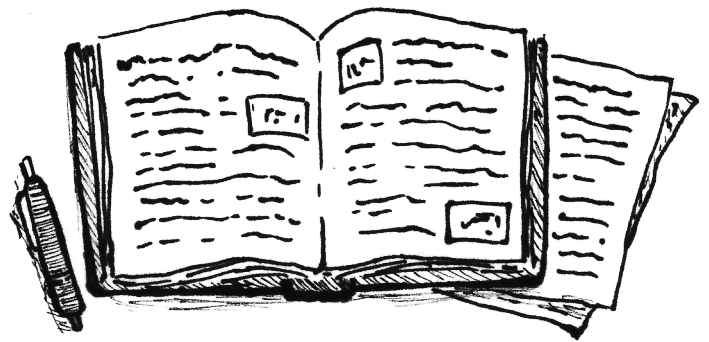
Stage 2: Forming the partnership

› What are your beliefs, values, and practices around work and community engagement? How might they be similar or different to the community's ways of working?

› How will your presence and involvement impact the community in positive and negative ways?

› How will the university benefit from this partnership? How will you benefit from this partnership?

› How will you debrief and reflect on what you have experienced, felt, and learned?

› How are you ensuring that the community leads the creation of this partnership? Are there any university policies and procedures that might limit the community's ability to determine and direct the design of this partnership?

Stage 3: Maintaining the partnership

› How are you accountable to your Indigenous partners? When and where does your accountability to a community partner start and end?

› How do you practice gratitude and reciprocity in your personal relationships with community partners?

› What do you still need to learn about the community? What can you learn on your own and what will you need the community to teach you?

› How are you ensuring that you are not assuming the role of the expert?

› Which individuals and groups do you collaborate with in the community? Why do you work with them and not others? Who else should you be working with?

› How have your work and community engagement experiences impacted your beliefs, approaches, and practices around work?

Stage 4: Closing the partnership

› How can you ensure that you are following the community's lead in closing the partnership?

› How have you and your institution benefited from this partnership?

› How can you honour and show gratitude for the relationships you have built with community members? How has the community taught you to demonstrate gratitude?

› How can you create safe spaces for the community to share final and potentially difficult feedback about their experience in this partnership?

› In what ways are you willing and able to continue supporting the community once the partnership ends?

Stage 5: The relationship after the work

› What were your perceptions, judgments, and beliefs about working with Indigenous communities before partnering with the community? How have those perceptions, judgments and beliefs changed?

› What opportunities has this partnership opened for you? How are you sharing these benefits with the community?

› How will you humbly share the knowledge and gifts you receive from the community, if asked to do so?

› What are some ways in which you can continue to support Indigenous communities and peoples in your personal and professional lives?

› How will you continue to show care for the community after the formal partnership has ended? How can you use the power and resources afforded to you by the university to continue this care?

› How are you staying in touch with the community? Do you visit or communicate with them regularly? How do you acknowledge important events?

› Have you shared the community's feedback with the university? How have you taken action within your circles of control and influence?

SECTION 3: PARTNER CONVERSATIONS

Partner conversations can be literal conversations between you and your community partners, or they can be explorations of a question or idea that take shape in other forms, such as sharing circles, storytelling, play and movement, observation, non-verbal communication, and more.

As with all aspects of the community engagement process, relational assessment should centre the community's perspectives and approaches and, ideally, be community-led. It is important to design assessment practices with our community partners, so that we can find out which questions are most important to the community and what methods and approaches would work best.

> The Practitioner Workbook offers a collection of learning exercises that will support partner conversation, including Protocols for Indigenous Community Engagement, …But is it reciprocity?, and Mapping Diverse Relationships.

Stage 1: The work before the work

› Are there any opportunities for me to learn more about the community and get to know community members, such as events, presentations, or rallies?

› What is important for me to learn about the community?

› Are there any protocols I should be observing while approaching the community for the first time? Are there people I should check with before starting to build a relationship with the community?

› How can I support the community's existing work?

› What is the best way to stay in touch as we get to know each other?

› What would you like to know about me?

Stage 2: Forming the partnership

› What would we like to know about each other, our cultures, and our communities or institutions?

› Are there any community members or knowledge-holders with whom I should connect to learn more about the community? How can I show my gratitude and ensure they are properly remunerated?

› What's the history of this partnership? What has been the community's experience working with the University of Manitoba or other postsecondary institutions?

› How do we want to engage in reflection together? When would it be good to reflect together? What will help us share challenging feedback with each other?

› What is my role in this partnership? What is the role of the community?

› What do we want reciprocity to feel and look lik in this partnership? Who is responsible for working towards reciprocity?

› What should we do to make sure this partnership starts in a good way? Are there community protocols I should follow?

› What support and learning do we need from each other?

› Who should be involved in this project? How can we ensure that we involve community members of diverse genders, ages, and experiences in the formation of this partnership?

› Who holds more power and resources at this point in time? How can we distribute the power and resources more equitably?

› How might the university's presence and involvement impact the community in positive and negative ways?

› What resources does the community need to begin the work of creating this partnership? Who is getting paid to do this work and who isn't? How can we make this more equitable?

Stage 3: Maintaining the partnership

› What is my role in this partnership? What is the role of the community? Have these roles changed since we started this partnership?

› How are we feeling about our relationship? What would make us feel that we have a strong relationship? How are you feeling about my involvement?

› What challenges have we encountered along the way? What areas of our relationship do we want to strengthen?

› In what concrete ways are we practicing reciprocity in this partnership, both at a personal and institutional level? What more can the university do?

› Does the community feel a sense of reciprocity in this partnership? What have I assumed were acts of reciprocity but weren't? Are there other ways in which the university could engage in reciprocity?

› Are we communicating and reflecting well with each other? Is there anything we would like to share with each other?

› How are our relational assessment methods working for us? Are there other methods we would like to try?

› Am I listening? What does it look and feel like when I'm listening to the community?

› What have we accomplished together? Who has benefited from our work so far?

› Who has experienced negative or unexpected impacts, and how can we address these impacts and prevent them in the future?

› Is the community feeling respected and supported in this partnership? What protocols apply to this stage? Are there any resources that are needed?

› Which individuals and groups do we collaborate with in the community? Who is missing? Who should we invite to get involved?

› Are there any university processes and policies that are creating barriers for the community and our work together? Which ones can we change immediately and which ones are longer-term system changes? How can we adapt together?

› Have I adapted my ways of working and relating to align with the community?

Stage 4: Closing the partnership

› How do we feel about closing this partnership? Did the community have a say in this decision?

› What has working together been like? What has our work together meant to us?

› What are the community's protocols for closing an agreement or partnership? Who should we be working with to close the partnership in a good way?

› How has the community been impacted by this partnership in positive and negative ways?

› How has the community benefited from this partnership? How has the university benefited? Who has benefited the most?

› Did the university live up to its commitment to reciprocity? Are there any promises that we still need to fulfill?

› Who was part of our work? Who made our work together possible? Who kept their distance and why?

› How can we ensure that diverse community members feel meaningfully recognized and included in the closing of this partnership?

› How should we recognize people for their work, now and in the future? How can we ensure that the community shares the benefits of this work?

› How do we want to celebrate the work we have done together? How can we show gratitude and appreciation for each other?

› What does closing this partnership mean for the community? Will it leave any resource or other gaps? How can the university make sure the community is supported through this transition, and that we replace the resources we are taking away?

› Does the community want to continue fostering a relationship with the university after this partnership ends? Are there other potential university partnerships that the community might like to explore? How can I support those goals?

› Does the community want to continue fostering a personal relationship with me after closing this partnership? How do we want to stay touch?

› How will our relationship change once we are no longer in a formal partnership? Do any responsibilities remain even after this partnership closes?

› What feedback do you have for me and the university? What changes would you like to see?

Stage 5: The relationship after the work

› What does relational accountability look like? In what ways would you like me to continue supporting the community?

› What are your current projects? How can I continue to support your work? Are there other potential university partners that I can connect you with?

› Were there areas of our work together where you encountered barriers or experienced harms? How can we work to address or prevent these barriers and harms in future partnerships?

› How do we want to stay in touch with each other?

SECTION 4: ASSESSMENT RESOURCES

Na-gah mo Waasbishkizi Ojijaak Bimise Keetwaatino: Singing White Crane Flying North Gathering A Bundle for Indigenous Evaluation by the Canadian Centre for Policy Alternatives

The Bundle provides a guide for planning, designing, implementing, and reporting on evaluations that are grounded in Indigenous values and principles. The report provides a common understanding of the purpose of evaluation; how it can be beneficial for community; and Indigenous principles, values, considerations, and methods that could be used in the design and implementation of evaluation.

Bundle: https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/reports/na-gah-mo-waasbishkizi-ojijaak-bimise-keetwaatino-singing-white-crane-flying

Article: https://www.policyalternatives.ca/publications/commentary/fast-facts-na-gah-mo-waabishkizi-ojijaak-bimise-keetwaatino-singing-white

The Circle by the National Centre for Collaboration in Indigenous Education (NCCIE)

A lesson plan for introducing and facilitating talking circles.

https://www.nccie.ca/lessonplan/the-circle/

Medicine Wheel Goal Setting with Christine M'Lot

In this three-part videos series, Christine M'Lot shares Anishinaabe teachings on how to use the medicine wheel for goal-setting. This activity can be adapted to conduct relational assessment individually and with the community at the beginning of each stage of engagement—and especially during Stage 2: Forming the partnership.

https://www.createtolearn.ca/tutorial/medicine-wheel-goal-setting

The following are western community engagement resources that can be adapted for an Indigenous partnership context.

History Map by Hyper Island

An arts-based activity for creating a visual map of the journey they have shared with each other. The question banks in Practitioner Reflection and Partner Conversations can be used as cues to reflect on the history of the partnership.

https://toolbox.hyperisland.com/history-map

7 Mindfulness Exercises for Groups

A guide for facilitating mindfulness activities with groups to explore topics such as vulnerability, difficult emotions and time management. The question banks in Practitioner Reflection and Partner Conversations can be used with these exercises as debriefing activities.

https://mindfulnessexercises.com/7-mindfulness-exercises-for-groups/

What, So What, Now What? by Liberating Structures

A reflection structure that helps individuals and groups process experiences in stages, including what happened, why these observations are important, and what future actions make sense after this experience?

https://www.liberatingstructures.com/9-what-so-what-now-what-w/