
Engaging Student Mothers Creatively: Animated Stories of Navigating University, Inner City, and Home Worlds

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ABSTRACT The article discusses a collaborative project undertaken in Saskatoon by Community Engagement and Outreach office at the University of Saskatchewan in partnership with undergraduate student mothers with lived experience of poverty. The results of the project were presented as an animated graphic narrative that seeks to make space for an under-represented student subpopulation, tracing strategies of survival among university, inner city and home worlds. The innovative animation format is intended to share with all citizens how community supports can be used to claim fairer health and education outcomes within system forces at play in society. This article discusses the project process, including the background stories of the students. The entire project, based at the University of Saskatchewan, Community Engagement and Outreach office at Station 20 West, in Saskatoon's inner city, explores complex intersections of racialization, poverty and gender for the purpose of cultivating empathy and deeper understanding within the university to better support inner city students. amplifying community voices and emphasizing the social determinants of health in Saskatoon through animated stories.

KEYWORDS community student engagement; animation; social determinants of health; social justice; qualitative health approaches; critical collaboration; knowledge mobilization;

For our project, the three authors, including two Saskatoon University of Saskatchewan undergraduate mothers with lived experience of poverty, collaborated to create a public narrative about student mothers' experiences. Our project invited the students to tell their story and supported them in the process. The stories were then presented in the form of two animated graphic narratives. The resulting video and presentations have been used to build understanding and support among the broader community. The project is based out of the University of Saskatchewan Community Engagement Office, located in a social enterprise centre called Station 20 West. Our work had various objectives from the perspectives of participants, the university and the community-based organizations involved. In achieving these, we were committed to specific principles and ideas, which we will discuss later in the article.

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Background

Saskatoon's low-income population is concentrated in certain areas of the inner city, mainly in what is termed the core neighbourhoods, where the majority of people of Indigenous ancestry live. Due to the continuing impact of colonialism, First Nation and Métis people have relatively higher rates of poor health, and relatedly, poverty, poor housing and unemployment, and, which is relevant to our project, lower rates of university education. (Kouri, 2008; Neudorf et al., 2014).

Saskatoon's core neighbourhoods are under-resourced compared to other areas of the city. The high poverty rates do not sustain market-based enterprises such as supermarkets or malls (Cushon, Creighton, Kershaw, Marko, & Markham, 2013; Fuller, Engler-Stringer, & Muhajarine, 2015). However, in the last decades, there have been concerted efforts among community-based organizations to provide support to the local population. One of these is Station 20 West (S20W), a social enterprise centre providing local access to services in housing, food security, and other social supports. From its beginning, S20W sought the participation and support of important Saskatoon institutional partners, one of these being the University of Saskatchewan (UofS).

For its part, the UofS has faced pressure to improve its social accountability, including the achievement of more equitable outcomes for students of Aboriginal ancestry. A number of faculty, researchers and community workers have been working for some time to improve outcomes, to increase social accountability, and to act as models in campus community research and engagement. Therefore in 2013, the UofS established the Community Engagement and Outreach (CE) office at S20W to provide a bridge and buffer between the needs of the university research community and those of the local population. The role of the CE office has become even more significant due to the University's renewed in 2015 its commitment to Indigenization, which was part of the UofS response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and reinforced in the most recent UofS mission and vision statements. Part of meeting this goal will be increasing the sustained enrolment and success of First Nation and Métis students.

The CE team aims to increase accessibility to the university for those living and working in Saskatoon's inner city, while also supporting university stakeholders to engage respectfully and ethically with community stakeholders. It works collaboratively with community members and community-based organizations, developing a type of relational, educational and practical bridging between the research, teaching, and learning on campus, and the strengths, teachings, and needs of the community.

In 2014, we initiated the animation project, led by a team community navigator with a commitment to social justice and experience promoting engagement with young mothers living in poverty. The mandate was to involve undergraduates as co-creators, while increasing the profile of the CE office and the UofS.

The animation project participants were invited to collaborate because they live in the inner city and are users of the social enterprise centre. Their needs and daily lives are different than those of the general university student body. The animation was designed to highlight strategies

for survival not recognized by dominant structures, to apply learning in the (postsecondary) community and influence community change efforts, and most importantly, to do this in such a way that the undergraduate participants could state their own ideas of success and health (Cahill, 2007).

Objectives

The objectives of the project were to:

- Make space for an under-represented student subpopulation;
- Trace strategies of survival within university, inner city and home worlds;
- Meaningfully illustrate complex intersections of racialization, poverty and gender to cultivate empathy and deeper understanding within the university to better support inner city students;
- Demonstrate to citizens of the inner city how to use community support to claim fairer health and education outcomes within the system forces at play;
- Affirm actions that demonstrate skill and reconciliation;
- Communicate values of equity and love.

For community participants, the process of telling the stories and building the animation was intended to encourage them to reflect critically on their lives to gain a shared understanding of the factors that might contribute to their success. They hoped to demonstrate to their friends, sisters, mothers and acquaintances the way community supports can be used to claim fairer health and education outcomes.

For the CE office, the focus was to learn from the student participants and, through their experience, build understanding in the university and broader community about the participant stories themselves and what they reveal about the conditions and issues the women are experiencing.

We wanted to examine how community supports, campuses, cultural and situational perspectives, and personal resilience all interact in the lives of student mothers living in the core neighbourhoods. Ultimately, the project was intended to influence the UofS response to the disparities the stories reveal, through better policy and practice.

We wanted to rethink visual tools such as illustration and public narrative and to explore how, together, they could act as a means of revealing power impositions as defined by those who are experts in their own lived experience. And finally, the project was also intended to increase knowledge and improve the practice of community engagement generally.

Project Principles and Main Ideas

We were committed to certain ideas and principles throughout the process, consistent with community engagement that is anchored in mutuality and social change theory. First, it was important to us to make explicit that the conditions affecting Indigenous households and communities are products of colonialism, and, indirectly affect all of us. We were committed to a collaborative process with the invited student mothers. This was their life and their struggle,

and it was essential that they be central to how it was presented and discussed. The key was *critical* collaboration which meant deliberate and continuous looping in on representations and feelings.

While it was important to show the issues and inequities facing student mothers, we were also committed to seeing and showing the strengths and resilience of the population living in poverty. We sought to provide a counter representation to being overcome by system barriers and instead, to account for those barriers. Our intention was to magnify the women's power and autonomy, to see their daily actions as resilience. It was critical that the illustrations capture those seemingly nebulous relationships to power and autonomy as daily undertakings of Saskatoon citizens, as skilled resilience.

We wanted to go beyond personal story telling and to account for social factors that are understood as social determinants of health, including power structures and relationships. We wanted to increase understanding of social change efforts and social justice, and to communicate impacts of the social determinants of health, which play a significant role in the quality of life of all Saskatoon residents not just those living in poverty. Consequently we needed to build relationships and to communicate the values of equity, courage, family, and power that exist personally and collectively. We were committed to the principle of integrating these values in our project design and frameworks in health. In academic terms, this is related to integrating intersectionality and decolonization theories and practice (Mundel & Chapman, 2010; Springer et al., 2012; St. Denis, 2014).

Process and Decision-Making

There were several factors involved in the CE office's decision to initiate this project as part of our mandate to engage undergraduates. We chose to focus on student mothers because they represent a considerable part of the city's core neighborhood population, and finding ways to support them would significantly improve their quality of education and quality of life. (Kossick-Kouri, 2010; Shan et al., 2012). Such a project would also help the University meet its goal to improve desired outcomes for its students. After reviewing media and student profile videos that the UofS had used previously in its promotional material, and given our location in the inner city, it didn't make sense to profile typical student populations in typical ways. Engaging the students in creating their own story would allow us, on the one hand, to identify issues and their own ideas of success and health and, on the other hand, to celebrate personal strengths.

Presenting the stories in an animation format helped us to better capture and show complexities. An animation was particularly suitable because it allowed for many interpretations at one time. It allowed us to construct symbolic realities. Animation, as an art form, can be more intimate and can frame collective experiences and actions in an inclusive and digestible format, facilitate new understandings, develop and showcase talents, and clarify experiences. An electronic animation is a shareable tool that allows access to the documented stories by any party. It is celebratory and crystallizes realities at the same time, with high potential for knowledge accessibility and transfer using media. For example, the President of the UofS

could be watching the animation at the same time as a participant's cousin in the inner city.

Finally, we wanted to demonstrate how to use community supports both at Station 20 West and elsewhere to claim fairer outcomes. Given that we are situated in the core neighbourhood and have innovative management, we needed to address our unique context and the history of the building. We had an opportunity to facilitate UofS infrastructure contributing to the under-resourced community-based organizations.

Given the number of various interested parties and people involved in the project, a multi-pronged approach was used. Our goal was to provide positive outcomes for everyone involved: the students, the CE office, the co-locators at Station 20 West, the community, the UofS and the collaborators.

The Participants

The two students, Angel Shingoose and Tania Guertin, collaborated to create their animated graphic narratives. Angel identifies herself and her children as Cree and Saulteaux. Tania identifies herself as Scottish and French and her son as Cree, Scottish and French. They are part of an underrepresented group of students at the University. They live in the core of Saskatoon and are users of Station 20 West. Their needs and daily life practice are different than those of a general university student body and they share complex experiences intersecting gender, racialization and poverty.

In addition to the two story-telling participants, the project invited three other students with skills in illustration, to collaborate on the production of the animation. We also invited mentors to be a part of the project, two young women who were recent UofS alumni and graduates of Next Up, a social justice leadership-training program in which they participated in public narrative.

One of the factors that facilitated the students' participation was that the project leader had experience with other projects and interventions in the community. She had contacts through her established relationships and was known and trusted. The mentors added the opportunity for collective reflection on personal experiences, in a space of mutual respect, expanded self-concept, trust and safety, thus creating a climate of mutuality.

The Creation of the Animation

The story telling process entailed a series of interviews and discussions over a year, involving the students and the project leader, and at different times including the mentors and the illustrators. These meetings included a process of creating a public narrative, using the Marshall Ganz framework of a *story of self, us and now* (Ganz & Ganz, 2008). We interpreted this model to mean that the *story of self* is focused on personal reflections and understandings, the *story of us* includes analysis and collective reflections, and the *story of now* concludes with action and persuasion. The overarching framework included three steps: changing the balance of power, building on existing skills, and changing the environment, i.e., moving from the intimate to the political, collective and persuasive voice (Groleau, Zelkowitz, & Cabral, 2009).

In addition to their specific roles, the project leader and other participants provided

support for the student mothers. Their interactions also increased opportunities for collective reflection on personal experiences. More generally, they provided a younger generational perspective and community ties, and contributed to relationship building, thereby increasing social capital and connectedness.

Once the students had created drafts of their stories, the process of developing the animation began. To ensure that the animated story represented the students, many meetings and discussions ensued around storyboards and draft images. For example, when Angel described the details of her daily life and the many tasks she had to accomplish just to begin her day, the illustrator's initial drawing included all the tasks with Angel's head hung low and looking burdened and somewhat defeated. However, Angel disagreed with this portrayal, saying, "I don't feel that way when I am taking care of my kids in the morning. It's hard work, but it's not a burden." The drawing was changed to represent more accurately how she felt, which was principally love for her children rather than the oppression of poverty.

The Animations

Angel's and Tania's stories are each presented in an animated 6-min video. Each video begins with the student's family background and moves to her personal circumstances. Following the model of *the story of self, us and now*, the video describes her challenge and focuses on a choice. Throughout the story, she expresses her feelings and her values. The video then moves to the issues she faces and her strategies in response.

As per the model, the student's description of her experiences and expression of her values evoke empathy, while her challenge elicits attention. The audience is compelled to feel a sense of urgency about her need to make a choice, anger about the conditions requiring this difficult choice, inspired and hopeful about her ability to overcome, and a sense of solidarity with her spirit. The audience is engaged with the values she presents, the emotion she elicits, and the action that is called for in the end (Ganz, 2001, 2007).

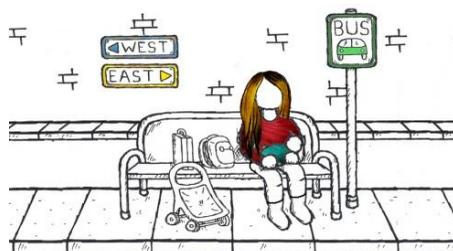
For example, the image from Tania's video of her mother's house portrays difficulty but also love, as she narrates:



My mother was a single parent and worked diligently to provide for us and our home was filled with love. Although my mother worked very hard we did not move beyond living in low-income. This was not because my mother didn't try. In fact, my mother worked harder than anyone I knew. Our living conditions were because of the unfair systems in society. I could see that these systems made it nearly impossible for my mom, family

Angel at the Bus Stop

This frame conveys the crossroads implied in Angel's story and speaks of the moment when Angel realized she wanted to change her life.



Tania in the Ring

In this frame, Tania is portrayed as fighting the forces against her in a boxing ring, wearing a dress made of books, to represent her belief that education is what will define her future and her son's wellbeing.



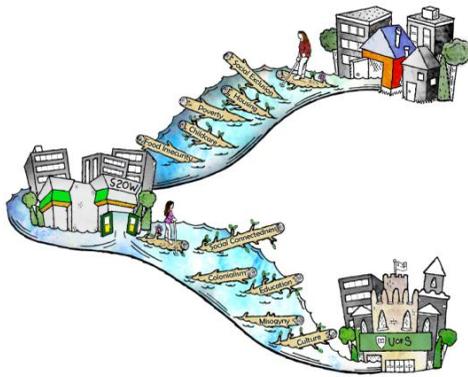
Angel at Home

Reflective of the public narrative, Angel and Tania are each seeking balance between the story being her own and being everyone's story. In this frame Angel portrays an intimate image of many women's lives – her story is everyone's story, a collective story. There is love and skill within this frame, echoing the values of family and courage. In this image we see actions of skill in an atmosphere of taking care of others. We sought to convey a meaningful representation of the inside of an urban First Nation mother's home, including not only the required multi-tasking, but also the sweet grass and other intimate details, with the convergence of the three worlds of the university, the core and the home.



River of Resilience

The *river of resilience* image is incorporated into both Angel and Tania's animations. In this image, we see the three worlds: home, the core neighbourhood and the university. The symbolism of the river is important within the Saskatoon context. Though traditionally the river acts as an artery for community vibrancy and nourishment, the symbolism here



is that the river divides the core and the UofS. Recent studies from the Community Health and Epidemiology Department have shown that persistent social and health disparities exist among these neighborhoods.

This project has incorporated the social determinants of health. The driving theme that has emerged is resilience. This image is meant to capture the complexity of navigating these three worlds - in constant action - between negative determinants and those that influence fairer outcomes. This image also captures the

relationship to power and autonomy throughout daily activities.

This river image presents a counter representation to being overcome by system barriers and instead accounts for injustices and aims to amplify the power and autonomy of Angel and Tania's dance, that balance among and the movement on top of these social determinants as daily actions, as resilience. It captures the complexity of standing against the confluence of system forces with skill.

Conclusion and Next Steps

Currently we are in the process of using the animations to share understanding and to invite audiences to rethink their assumptions about how poverty, motherhood and race might affect the ability of students to complete their studies. To date, we have made over 20 presentations to various departments at the UofS, as well as local and wider conferences. These presentations have focused on a variety of themes, including indigenization, anti-racism education, indigenous feminisms, community engagement and collaboration, global and local health, arts-based learning and mentorship. The animations have been screened in Thunderchild First Nation for the Miyo Pimatsowin program and the Building Reconciliation Forum at the UofS as well as in Australia as part of the reconciliation process there. We have also presented to the partners at S20W, the City of Saskatoon, the Saskatoon Health Region, and members of the Saskatoon Indigenous Cultural Centre. In addition to the videos, the presentation includes a discussion of the issues addressed here. When possible, Angel and Tania or both have co-

presented with the Project Leader. We have launched the animations online. They can be viewed at <http://www.usask.ca/engagement/station-20-west/the-animation-project.php>.

The response to the presentations has been very positive and has led to discussions about policy and practice change at the UofS with respect to



supporting undergraduate mothers living in poverty. There have also been remarks about the contribution and importance of Station 20 West. From the perspective of the institutions, therefore, the goals are being met.

Student mothers and collaborators have received stewardship and experience by helping to conduct qualitative health approaches in useful, practical and innovative ways. We also know that the students have accomplished their goals of increasing their understanding and becoming more empowered through their participation with the project.

Thoughts from Co-creators

Tania: I'd like people to know how important and positive the anti-oppressive framework was for me. It gave me a sense of self worth and determination, giving me choice and the ability to act on my decisions and thoughts. Every component that I wanted was considered and used or explained to me if it wasn't possible. I deeply value and feel invested in the project's message. I've gained a strong



sense of empowerment through deep and meaningful self-reflection. Also, I want those who are unaware of their oppressive actions to understand how deeply they impact people, families and communities and how much power they have. Being a part of this project has also taught me about my own privileges and how I may be oppressive to others and how I can continue to change my own thoughts and actions toward justice and empathy.

Those who live in poverty are made to feel shameful by people who will not take the time to listen more and judge less. This sense of shame hinders peoples' abilities to use services in their community. Many people do not realize how difficult it is to escape poverty. When you are born within a family that is struggling those struggles become yours to bear and stay with you as you fight to provide more for yourself and your family. I hope this project can be a way to teach others everyone has a story of struggle.

Angel: I want people to know how much fun I've had being a part of this project. I like how I was taken seriously. I have a stronger idea of who I am and that my story is an important one. I learned a lot about what identity means and about myself. I have a better understanding about the impact of negative systems and how they influence my life and the lives of others. I really valued getting together, spending time and building authentic relationships with different people.



There are people like me who are trying to create a positive change and we are actually just pushing back at the system that put us there. It doesn't matter how many good choices you make it will always be hard to get out of the cycle. It is a lot of hard work. We need to encourage one another and help one another - we have the right to be anybody and do anything.

In summary, we have learned that our process has engaged young people and sparked excitement, curiosity and commitment. The animation has informed higher learning institutions about inclusivity and ethical long-term engagement in meaningful ways. The project has already begun to influence internal UofS practices designed to support students. For example, the Task Force on Indigenization and the UofS Library are incorporating a student advisory component. Next steps for the project will include continuing support for creating new mechanisms to support students by providing recommendations and training for UofS personnel and informing research designs in creative knowledge exchange.

The project was designed for several audiences. The primary audience is university administrators, faculty and staff responsible for administrative practices regarding Indigenous and low-income undergraduates. A secondary audience is the university students and graduates, including undergraduate parents. The third audience is community organizations, their members, and citizens living in city core neighbourhoods. Our fourth audience is the general public. The Project Leader has been invited to present and share this animation as a learning

tool for students but also for staff and contract workers in health and civil service institutions.

In the future, we want to continue to meet and learn from others working on community engagement in creative ways. We hope to collaborate with those involved, in evaluating new and existing interventions, and make recommendations that can lead to more meaningful engagement and useful policy change.



The project Team in front of Station 20 West

Leah Arcand, alumni, mentor

Tania Guertin, co creator, principal narrative, undergraduate student

Angel Shingoose, co creator, principal narrative, undergraduate student

Rachel Malena, alumni, mentor and original music

Lise Kossick-Kouri, design, production, editor (project leader)

Jane McWhirter, illustrator, colour editor, undergraduate student

Mike Tremblay, illustrator, undergraduate student

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About the Authors

Lise Kouri (*corresponding author*) is a Master's student in the Department of Community Health and Epidemiology, under Dr. Rachel Engler-Stringer. Her current research concerns alternative food networks, resilience and resistance within a colonized environment in Saskatoon. She is also a team member of the U of S community engagement and outreach office Station 20 West where she recently produced and designed two animation projects. Email: lise.kouri@gmail.com

Angel Shingoose has completed 3 years in the Indigenous Teaching Education Program at the University of Saskatchewan. She currently contributes to knowledge mobilization efforts for the project through presentations and other media. Angel looks forward to finishing her degree and becoming an ITEP graduate.

Tania Guertin is a recent University of Saskatchewan graduate with a BA in Indigenous Studies. In June 2017, she will have completed her BSW degree with the University of Regina. In her role as collaborator on the project, Tania contributes to knowledge mobilization efforts through trainings, presentations, panel discussions and other media. Tania's hope is to continue to work in knowledge mobilization, advocacy and social justice.

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