

Our Kiyohkēwin Podcast

M: Michael

K: Kristine

0:07 K: Welcome to the Kiyohkēwin Podcast. My name is Kristine Dreaver-Charles. I am a member of the Mistawasis First Nation in Saskatchewan, so I live, and I work on my treaty territory, Treaty 6. I work as an instructional designer in the distance education unit at the University of Saskatchewan as well, and I study there, I am a PhD candidate in the Cross Departmental Studies program. And my focus is on decolonization and distance education.

Michael, do you want to start and introduce yourself? And tell us who you are and where you are from. That's a very Indigenous kind of question to start with.

0:46 M: Why sure. Hello, my name is Michael Cottrell. I am from County Cork, Ireland originally. I have lived in Canada since mid 1980's, mostly in Saskatoon, and have spent my career in schools. In elementary, secondary, and post-secondary, including working with Indigenous students at the University of Saskatchewan.

1:10 K: How did you end up at the U of S?

1:13 M: At the U of S? Well I came here originally to do a PhD. So I came here as an international student, and then went away for a while. Had an opportunity while I was a graduate student to teach a class for the ITEP program in the College of Education on campus. And then went down east for a while. And after a couple of years, I saw a position advertised in the ITEP program and applied for that position. That's what brought me back to Saskatoon, and then from the ITEP program I moved to the department of education administration, also in College of Education. But it was working with Indigenous persons that brought me back to Saskatoon.

1:59 K: Can you explain what ITEP is?

2:03 M: ITEP is Indian Teacher Education Program, and it's a designated program to prepare Indigenous educators at the University of Saskatchewan. It's actually one of the oldest Indigenous programs in, I think in, maybe in the world actually, fifty years. Pretty remarkable, influential program.

2:24 K: What led you to organize study abroad courses Michael? How did you get started with this?

2:30 M: That's a good question Kristine, I guess the first thing was being an international student myself. Having had that experience myself moving from one country to another country in order to study. I experienced, personally the benefits on internationalization in education. And then subsequently developed a great love of travel for pleasure and also for continued learning. And then with a colleague from Educational Foundations, Dr. Paul Orłowski, had the opportunity to participate in study abroad in Finland, and before that, went on a study abroad to China with my colleagues from my department. So I had a number of opportunities

to do it, almost as an apprentice. And then from there really enjoyed that. Saw the benefits of it. And from there then began organizing study abroad classes led by myself with others.

3:34 K: It takes a lot of effort for you to organize study abroad for students and to travel with students so, tell me why you put in all of the effort.

3:45 M: It does take more effort, no doubt about it, the logistics of study abroad are significant, and, especially around risk. Anticipating and managing risk for the students. I think that's the biggest logistical challenge. And then of course organizing things like hotels and accommodations, transportation and so on. So, you have to have good organizational skills I guess, and a good sense of being able to manage risk. And, I think a bit of a risk taking capacity too because you have to be willing to go out there and take the risk with students. Short answer Kristine, for the love of it. For the love of it, for the enjoyment of it. For the sense of accomplishment that comes from being able to provide for that kind of learning opportunity for other people. It's such a tremendously rewarding experience. Not that classroom teaching isn't rewarding but to be able to engage with learning with a group of people who are like-minded, you know, who also want to engage in learning. It's very, very beautiful pedagogical experience, and I think we will talk later about the learning from me that goes along with it. It requires constant, on-going learning. So I guess the short answer then is I do the work associated with it because I think it's worth it. It's worth it personally, and pedagogically and for the institution.

5:22 K: What's the learning value for students? And then, for yourself as well?

5:26 M: Yeah, well there's a ton of research that speaks to the multiple, multiple benefits for students of engaging in study abroad either short term or long term. And it's a growing trend in post-secondary institutions around the world, and in some situations it's a mandatory part of receiving credential for undergraduate, or graduate programs. And, you know, they're all clearly listed in the research. Personal growth, cross-cultural competency development. Independence, people become more independent when you take them away from their normal, familiar situation. The ability to innovate, flexibility, tolerance of uncomfortable situations and ambiguities. All of those things. So there's a multitude, but I think that there's the most important one, or attractive one for me is that it has the potential to change people. The word transformative is thrown around in education a lot and, not everything we call transformative is transformative. You know, it's very interesting and all that, but I think that study abroad, not for everybody, but study abroad has the potential to transform people's entire world view, and move people in a more positive direction as educators, as human beings, as citizens. All of those kinds of things and I've seen it especially for leaders, for people in leadership positions. The capacity, and of you want to change leaders, if you're in that situation where it's important for you to change how leaders think, or how they see the world, I think study abroad is the best way, in a short period of time to actually do that. And it won't work for everybody, but it will work for a lot of them. Because once we are taken out of our comfort zone, and what's familiar to us and have to see the world, kind of from the perspective of other people, we can't but be changed by that. We can't but be changed by seeing the world through the eyes of other people. Understanding their experiences and those kinds of things. So, I think it's, we generally, we come back better people. Better professionals, better educators, better human beings, you know. Better Canadians, better treaty people, better, just better human

beings just generally. And I think that's part of my philosophy of education is that we should make the world a better place by virtue of what we do. And you can have a ton of fun along the way. It really is some of the most joyful, pedagogical experiences that I've ever had is being part of study abroad. So, for all of those reasons it's worth the effort and I think institutions should prioritize study abroad opportunities for students as part of high-quality education.

8:43 K: I'd agree. I got to go with you as a part of study abroad, and you know this, to Ireland and it was your second trip, so I was part of that second group that got to go, and what usually surprises people when I tell them about travelling is that I've been there before. So, it wasn't my first trip to Ireland, it was my third. What I found really interesting about the opportunity to do study abroad with you, was that I had been to, you know, the sights to see in Ireland. What I didn't really understand was the education system and a lot of the history that surrounded that. I guess I had a lot of missing pieces in my understanding of the country and so, taking the study abroad course really filled in a lot, and it did. It was very impactful I think, and it was a really good time and, you know, I could remember telling people that I was going for this study abroad course. And my preconceptions of it were that it was going to be an easy credit, and I think that study abroad kind of gets labelled that too often and what actually happened is that out of my five graduate courses that I have taken, that was the last one and it was the most difficult. It was the paper, I think, that challenged me the most. Fitting all of those pieces together with my Indigenous perspective, and looking at Ireland and the education system there, you know really considering how all those pieces fit together. It wasn't easy, you know, I think that's good learning that takes place, right? When you're in those situations

10:21 M: And there's definitely, the main criticisms are, study abroad is expensive, and elitist, and exclusive. And there's no doubt that it is expensive. It can exclude people on their inability to pay, and from an accessibility perspective for people with disabilities and so on. It can be, it's a real challenge. A real challenge so there are those barriers for sure that are germane to study abroad that can be overcome to an extent. But I think that there's also a perception that, as I said, it's an opportunity to go and have a. Kind of a spring break kind of experience. Basically, a holiday with a credit attached to it. There are definitely aspects to study abroad that should be about a lot of fun and enjoyment, and beaches, and seeing beautiful places and so on. I think that it's an important part of the learning experience. So, you want people to have fun and so on, but it's much more than that. Much more than that, and I think that a lot of people have the same experience that ends up being more demanding, more challenging, and more rewarding. And definitely, just through the academic perspective, teaching a study abroad class is, there's more marking, there's definitely more student engagement, you know, all of those things, so it's a serious academic experience that as many students as possible should avail themselves of.

11:44 K: In 2020 we got to go to Jamaica for study abroad. It was my second trip with you and, I got to go not as a student this time, but as an instructional designer and it was really neat. Together we collaborated on this course, and we used the technologies available to support our study abroad course while we were in Jamaica

12:07 M: Yeah, our collaboration started when Kristine participated in the study abroad opportunity in Ireland, and getting to know Kristine, and her capacity as a course designer and sort of start having conversations with Kristine about the potential for using some of her skills

and knowledge base to enhance study abroad. And she made some suggestions about, you know, potential to have multiple sites simultaneously, then connecting virtually and so on. Really kind of rocked my world in terms of what would be possible with study abroad and then subsequently having conversations with Kristine about innovative ways of accessing study abroad, developing new kind of frameworks to bring Indigenous perspectives into the assessment of study abroad. That's been some of the real, personal, and professional growth and development for me as an educator, as part of working with Kristine. For which I am very, very grateful.

13:15 K: how many students did you take?

13:17 M: I think we had twenty students in that group Kristine. Pretty close to, yeah. And that was my first experience with a combination of graduate and undergrad students in the same class. So that was, to be honest, a little more stressful, but anyway it worked out well, and younger students really were more responsible, and also made the most of their time. Had a good time in Jamaica. It was a really, really good experience to work with Kristine, or more, to see Kristine work in terms of the online tools and then and so on. And it was, visually much, much more attractive online product. And some of the tools, WordPress, and the discussion boards and so on. I think really added to the experience overall and that was just before Covid, so we were really, really fortunate to be able to have that experience and, you know, be in that situation where a group of people have come, not just from colonization, but from slavery. That actually have come from enslavement, and had become free people then built a, were in the process of building a country. Building a school system to support that nation. And the Caribbean was a really, really, really great experience. And I think that was a memorable learning experience for a lot of the students. And just being struck by the poverty, and the challenges that they face and yet, you know. Not wanting to be stereotypical, the amount of laughter heard in that country was extraordinary in terms of seeing the people that were happy even though that many of them extremely poor. Extremely poor. So again, I would say a transformation for me in terms of my sense of the world. My sense of the world. And also seeing the incredible disparities in Jamaican between the wealthy and the poor. It was always a difficult, and a big part of the learning also. And I guess to wrap up this part, it kind of alerted me to the possibilities with the online tools for enhancing the Study Abroad. So my focus up until then was more on the experiential and the academic, and that made me think about all the possibilities, all of virtual and online possibilities available. So I really appreciated all of Kristine's work in that.

15:58 K: For me, I think we met some very influential people who were working in Jamaica in their education system. And so we got to hear from them, and then we also got to be sort of, outsiders looking in at the classrooms. And so we visited a couple of schools as well. But we got to really see the schools and it was very eye opening.

16:25 M: Yeah, for sure. And we've talked about this Kristine, that the formality of their education systems was very surprising. So you don't really know people until you go and visit them. There you go. Until you go to their homes and see what they're, see what they're like. Yeah, very interesting.

16:44 K: So, the dynamics of the students. So you had kind of a mixed group of students, right? You had quite a few Indigenous students, non-Indigenous students?

16:52 M: Yeah, and that's always the challenge, is you never know who you are going to get out of the bus. A group of strangers coming together and spending a lot of time together in close proximity, that's a tricky bit of business as it doesn't always go well and not everybody is going to love everybody else and so on. But the, I guess the deliberate piece for me was encouraging or inviting as many Indigenous people as possible to come. To be lucky enough to have the support from ISAC to be able to put financial support in place. To make that viable for people. I know how much of a barrier that is.

17:29 K: Can you explain ISSAC?

17:30 M: Yeah, sure. So ISSAC is International Student Study Abroad Center at University of Saskatchewan, and they, they're the unit in the university that is charged with supporting both incoming international students, coming into the university and domestic students going out for international experiences. So that was the intentional part. And then I guess the goal there was to break down some of the barriers and some of the apartheid that I see in Saskatchewan where there was so much segregation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Even at the university level, even in classrooms and so on. So I seen that this is an opportunity to essentially force people, force educators, Indigenous and non, to spend time together and to get to know each other. The other kind of really neat thing, in Ireland anyway, was doing that, so bringing people together, in a context where white people had been colonized. Where white people had been colonized and had gone through that experience of colonization. And that could be really disruptive for both, for white people and for non-white people. You know, white people are not used to seeing other white people being the underdogs. So it shakes both Indigenous, and non-Indigenous peoples some of the, just kind of knee-jerk assumptions of color. The other intentional piece was to be as inviting as possible to Indigenous students and to be as honoring as possible to Indigenous students. And partly as a form of thanks I guess for the hospitality that I've experienced from Indigenous people. I think those are kinds of things that people could bring back. Will, I think lead to a different view of the world basically. And then having the experience of Jamaica being a host, essentially. You know, I was being hosted there by some of our students and by people we were meeting in the institutions and so on. So that was a very different experience of being partly a guide, but also a host at the same time. And learning along with the students about this new country and this new education system and so on. So that was a fantastic experience also. And being at the water, and being at the beach in the water and those kinds of experiences were, I don't think that you ever forget those. That day that we spent at the waterfall Kristine, and I think, we did some work there maybe even that day...

20:12 K: We had a meeting on the beach.

20:14 M: We did, yeah but it was such a beautiful place. Such a beautiful place and all the students were around and having such a great time and to see the educators in the water sharing beer and having really, really good conversations was. That was very rewarding.

20:29 K: I think you asked me if I liked the water and I said that it's restorative, right? It's good for our spirit,

20:36 M: It really is, yes. It really is. And that was my, well Hawaii a little bit I guess, but that was the warmest water that I have ever been in, you know. And I'm used to going in getting blue and coming back out, because it just so cold that you just, like die of shock. Basically, die of shock, you don't. So being in water that you could, you, that was beautiful. That would speak to the hidden curriculum of study abroad that things that are not officially part of the learning outcomes can also occur in the informal and the formal kind of transgressive contexts.

21:16 K: I was thinking about, you know. There's a whole base piece there about reconciliation and relationality that come through in study abroad. Especially when, you know, you got a group of students where half of them are Indigenous and the other half of them are non-Indigenous. And they're coming together, and they are going to be on the bus together and so. You know I think that study abroad, kind of connects a lot of pieces. And it's lasting afterwards as well, right? So, it doesn't just end after study abroad is over.

21:46 M: Yeah, yeah no and I've seen that for sure that some real, genuine, lifelong relationships come out of those encounters and engagements. I think one of the things that study abroad does, and it's so obvious, but it literally. It takes us out of our own place. It takes us out of our familiar place and space. And it puts us into a different place where we were now guests of somebody else. And so, it disrupts the normal relationship that exists. But then you take both of those groups to another place and for the first time there's common ground. They're both now guests on somebody else's land. And I think it, those kinds of things really shake and force us to reconsider some of our attitudes and approaches and so on. And I'll never forget, Kristine, I think it was the first, our first trip to Ireland. Being at the monastery there, Gougane Barra. You know, it's such a beautiful place. Such a beautiful place. And one of the students said to me that she went to residential school and had a really, really bad experience with the Catholic church. But then she said, that coming to a place like this and seeing the beauty and feeling the benign spirits. She says it's really hard not to see beauty and value in a religion that creates that kind of thing. You know? And the I think too, that seeing that sculpture in Middleton, Kindred Spirits, you know it's, it's literally, it alerts you to the fact that different people with totally different cultures, in completely different parts of the world went through the same experience. And that can be very empowering, and kind of solidarity in people that have had basically the same experience in very different parts of the world. That can be very empowering too.

23:45 K: So this was the sculpture, that was a monument to the Choctaw and their...

23:50 M: That's the one yeah

23:52 K: Support during the famine?

23:53 M: That's right, yeah. That's right, and it's in Middleton on the yeah. And it's in the shape of, I forget how many, maybe a dozen very large. Like about forty foot tall, you know, feathers. Feathers, but they're arranged in a circle, the symbolism is a bowl of sharing food. And speaking especially to famine, starvation and so on. And just that these people who had just had, just

been kicked out of their territory, and starved and abused. Still thought they should share because they were going through the same experience. You know you can't see that kind of thing and not be touched by just the basic bonds of humanity that tie decent people together. So those are some of the very good experiences of study abroad.

24:59 K: So reconciliation, relationality, you know. Some of the friendships I have made as a graduate student. Because graduate school can be very isolating and feels like you're very much alone and with study abroad, I have met some of my closest friends. And I've met other Indigenous graduate students that I actually didn't know who were out there. So, I think that is really positive. Because you are able to spend time with people who. It's almost like you have an opportunity for instant friendship because you are there for a certain amount of time, and those distractions of your life aren't there maybe?

25:37 M: Yep, and I think we end up engaging with, and developing relationships with people that in normal circumstances, we might not. We discover that they are really decent people.

25:50 K: What about addressing inequity in education? I think you had talked a little bit about some of the challenges of funding for study abroad.

26:00 M: Yeah, for sure. I mean, that's the obvious barrier is that this is expensive. This is expensive and so historically only the affluent could have this experience. And so, they benefitted from that. And so it was a way by which the rich got richer basically, or privilege and advantage was transmitted, you know, from one generation to the next generation. So, I think, for this to be equitable, all students realistically should have the opportunity to avail of this without bankrupting themselves, or you know, without going through extreme deprivation and so on. So our institution, I give them great credit, provided some financial support. Not a huge, huge amount, but enough financial support with additional support for Indigenous students to make this viable for Indigenous students in a way that I think was not the case before this. So that's the obvious ongoing barrier. So, institutions, I think, need to think about how do you fund these things so that it's not just about the rich benefitting from these experiences. And then the other obvious one is access for students with disabilities, or those kinds of challenges. So, I think that's where virtual study abroad has tremendous benefit in that it's both a lot cheaper and accessible to anybody that has an internet connection. And so, I think that more and more sort of virtual opportunities will be available to students.

27:40 K: So last year in 2021, we collaborated again, and we started working on this idea of a virtual study abroad course, and you had indicated that you wanted to focus on three countries. So Ireland, Jamaica, and New Zealand would be the focus for students to explore the education system of these three countries in the study abroad, virtual study abroad course. What were the student responses to this? What did they come away with you think?

28:14 M: Yeah, well I think it, certainly some of the learning objectives and outcomes were realized in terms of. It allowed students to learn about education systems in those three countries. And how those three countries, colonial, and post-colonial histories kind of impacted schools. So, some of the big issues that we are dealing with here, and language and culture revitalization and reconciliation and achievement gaps and those kinds of things are being

addressed in other countries. So, we can learn about that. And I think it also gave the students a sort of taste, a taste of the cultures. Some of the scenery, some of the music and so on. But I think that what was not possible was the experiential aspects of, you know, the essential learning. And that, to me is kind of what is unique to study. One of the unique things about study abroad is that we learn with our senses as much as we do with our faculties, and our reasonings and so to be able to see, smell, hear, touch, taste. Those things, that's a really important part of experiential learning that I have not been able to figure out. I haven't been able to figure out how to simulate that in a virtual, maybe it would be our, but that would be, that would be possible. But it's, it's definitely been, I think a good option under Covid.

29:41 K: So then, I think the question is. How do you design a virtual study abroad course that can, maybe not simulate those but can...

29:52 M: Yep, that can create similar kinds of similar kinds of outcomes I guess. Similar kinds of experiences, and for sure Kristine. Like the Virtual Bus idea you know where everybody logs on at the same time and either text or online chat. Zoom's you know, sort of those types of things and you maybe simultaneously responding to a travel documentary or historical movie or something like that. And so it's literally like being on the bus and you are able to engage in conversations with people around you and so on. I think there's lots and lots of options for sure, and you know, limited by my limitations in the online technology area. But I can imagine with time even me. Even I could, you know, put something together that you would come away thinking that, "you know I wasn't in Jamaica, but I sure have a sense that what Jamaica is like and what the school is like. And how the schools came out of that culture and history and those kinds of things. So, I think that there's lots and lots of potential there, but I am still old-school and I want to, want to go to the beach.

31:08 K: I'd like to go as well. Yeah, and so, it's that idea of, I think that maybe our question is: How do you create that virtual bus for study abroad? How do you engage students, so that they feel like they're not missing out on the travelling aspect but where they're still learning about that country, or those countries? And they're trying new things and meeting new people in their class and not feeling like they're alone, maybe?

31:36 M: Well, there's Mezirow's theory of transformative learning. His idea, it's often been applied to study abroad and, real transformative learning happens after learners had, what he called a disorientating dilemma. After they experienced something that disorientated them based on their kind of prior view of the world and so on. And, I mean, that's what travel does, to a different place does. It's disorientating. Even the most experienced traveller, you know you're waking up in a different country and they might, and drive on the other side of the road or. It's going to be disorientating aspects to it. So it, then, how would we bring that, how would we disorientate people virtually as a way of, I guess catalyzing some of the learning transformation that happens with, you know, in-persons disorientations? I think that's possible; I think that's possible. You know, I haven't thought about that, but I think it's possible you know because that's kind of what travel does. It scares us. It shakes us up.

32:41 K: So, my disorienting moment it was when we were in Cork and. Remember you were picking me up one morning and you were running late, and I had on my backpack, and I

thought, ok that's fine I'll just shop. I have about a half an hour. I'll run into the store, the clothing store and look for some clothes. Then I thought, well, they're just going to think I'm a shoplifter because I am Indigenous, right? You are constantly. You are constantly followed in stores, you are a shoplifter. And then I had a moment of, but I'm not in Canada. They have no idea that I am Indigenous. They have no preconceptions, misconceptions of who I am, or stereotypes in their head of who I am.

33:30 M: Yep

33:31 K: And so, it just, it dawned on me, and that's that. I think that is that disorientation that you are talking about.

33:35 M: Very much so, very much so. We're literally, something that is part of your reality in one space, is not part of your reality in a different space.

33:46 K: It's the weight of being Indigenous in Canada.

33:48 M: Exactly, exactly, exactly, exactly, exactly. And how, even for a week, being in a different place can free you of that. And literally, it's like taking this weight off your shoulder and, you're the same person, but you're not. Those kinds of disorientations, Kristine, those are the, those are the pieces. You know?

34:06 K: I think that's it, Michael.

34:07 M: Thank you kindly Kristine.