

Ndehl Heehl Goodin? (Translation from Gitxsan: “How are you feeling? What is your heart telling you?”) Centring Gitxsan Worldviews in Midterm Course Experience Surveys

Dr. Jenny Morgan
University of Victoria

Sinensxw (Jessica Starlund)
University of Victoria

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Abstract

Background: *Ndehl Heehl Goodin?* (“How are you feeling? What is your heart telling you?”), funded by an internal teaching and research grant within the faculty of Human and Social Development at the University of Victoria, explores how Gitxsan worldviews can inform midterm course evaluations. Conventional evaluations rely on standardized metrics, with little consideration for how Indigenous pedagogies and relationality shape reflective learning. This study examined how Gitxsan ways of being can inform and affirm culturally grounded approaches to course feedback surveys.

Methods: Two former students of an asynchronous social work course and four Gitxsan community members participated in 30-60-minute interviews. Student interviews were recorded and transcribed, while community interviews followed Storywork with interviewer journaling. Purposeful sampling supported trust and relational connection. Data were thematically analyzed, and a Gitxsan Elder and fluent speaker translated thematic headings into Gitxanimx.

Results: Seven themes emerged: *Nada k'i'yhl t'il ts'ipxwit* (Engagement/Connection), *Hosim ho sagayt k'i'yhl gagoodiit* (Relationality), *Sityeekwsit* (Transformation), *Wila sawitxwt* (Identity), *Luu hoksxwit* (Belonging), *Lax yip* (Land), *Aluut'aa siwilaaksa* (Teachings), and *Heek'al* (Responsibility). Participants emphasized relational and land-based approaches that deepen reflection, strengthen community connection, and counter harms linked to quantitative systems.

Conclusions: Integrating Gitxsan ways of being into assessment can enhance reflective learning while honouring Indigenous worldviews. This pilot project offers groundwork for culturally grounded feedback tools in education.

Indigenization Statement

Both authors are Gitxsan, and this work is grounded in Gitxsan knowledge systems, relationships, protocols, and Storywork. The research was guided by principles of relational accountability, shaping the design, interpretation, translation, and sharing of findings. As Gitxsan researchers, we approach this work from within our own community and epistemological

frameworks while remaining accountable to the broader Gitxsan collective. Engagement with community members was undertaken in a relational and respectful manner to ensure the work reflects lived knowledge and cultural practices beyond the academic context. Authors contributed to the design, interpretation, and translation of this work and are credited as co-authors. Research occurred on the territories of the Lekwungen Peoples, Songhees, X^wsepsum, and W̱SÁNEĆ Nations, and on Gitxsan territories. We honour these Nations and uphold commitments to sovereignty and relational accountability.

Introduction

This study was conducted on the traditional and unceded territories of the Lekwungen Peoples, Songhees, X^wsepsum, and W̱SÁNEĆ Nations, as well as Gitxsan lands in northern British Columbia (BC), Canada. We acknowledge and give thanks to the Nations whose lands and knowledges have informed this work, recognizing the importance of grounding research and teaching practices in respect for Indigenous sovereignty, relational accountability, and cultural protocols. The Principal Investigator Dr. Jenny Morgan is Gitxsan from the Lax Gibuu (Wolf) clan and serves as an Assistant Teaching Professor at the University of Victoria Social Work program. Research Assistant (RA) Sinensxw/Jessica Starlund, who is Gitxsan from the Lax Seel/Ganeda (Frog) clan and Nuu-chah-nulth through her maternal lineage, began as a graduate student and is now a 2025 graduate of the University of Victoria Master of Education in Language Revitalization program. The team collaborated with Xsiwis/Dr. M. Jane Smith, whose foundational work in Gitxsan cultural and language revitalization informed this study; Xsiwis/Dr. M. Jane Smith provided translation support for findings into Gitxsanimx and her research has been instrumental in grounding contemporary approaches to Gitxsan storytelling and pedagogy (Smith, 2004).

In most post-secondary contexts, midterm and end-of-course evaluations are conducted using standardized survey instruments, typically consisting of Likert-scale questions and optional comment boxes. These tools are designed to measure student satisfaction, instructor

effectiveness, and course organization through quantitative and anonymous feedback. While widely used, such approaches often prioritize objectivity and standardization, and may not capture relational, cultural, or holistic dimensions of learning.

Within Indigenous and relational pedagogical contexts, the limitations of conventional midterm course evaluations become particularly pronounced. Standardized surveys are rooted in colonial assumptions of neutrality and objectivity, and they frequently prioritize quantitative measures over lived experience. In doing so, they leave no room for relational accountability, holistic ways of knowing, or culturally grounded perspectives. Their anonymous design can reproduce systemic harms by enabling racist, sexist, homophobic, and otherwise discriminatory comments that disproportionately target marginalized instructors, further entrenching inequities in the academy (Heffernan & Harpur, 2023).

In courses focused on Indigenous resistance, resurgence, and decolonial practice, conventional evaluation tools are particularly inadequate. They do not reflect students' engagement with relational learning, Indigenous knowledges, storytelling, or land-based reflection, nor do they honour the non-linear and seasonal rhythms of knowledge development. The University of Victoria Indigenous Plan (University of Victoria, 2023) calls for teaching and learning practices that respect Indigenous knowledge systems, languages, and culturally safe learning environments; this call underscores the urgency of developing alternatives to conventional surveys.

This study, *Ndehl Heehl Goodin?* ("How are you feeling? What is your heart telling you?" [Gitxsanimx]), is an exploratory pilot that centres Gitxsan worldviews in midterm course evaluation design. At present, instructors at the University of Victoria have autonomy to implement individually designed midterm evaluations, whereas standardized end-of-course

surveys remain under central administration and cannot be modified at the course level. This project focuses on midterm evaluations as an entry point, with the hope that findings may eventually inform broader institutional conversations about transforming standardized surveys to reflect Indigenous pedagogies and relational learning.

The methodology used embraces the role of dreams in guiding Indigenous research practice. In alignment with Gitxsan epistemologies (Smith, 2004), Dr. Morgan incorporated dream guidance into her positionality as Principal Investigator (PI). As Wilson (2008) observes, Indigenous approaches to research often draw on spiritual and ceremonial forms of knowledge, such as dreams, visions, prayer, and ceremony, which differs from Western models that tend to privilege empiricism, rationalism, and observable data as the only valid sources of knowledge. A few months into the study, Dr. Morgan dreamt of attending an event with her late father, Sim'oogit Tsu/Clifford Morgan, a residential school survivor, where the late Commissioner and Senator Murray Sinclair was speaking. As the event ended, she and her father moved toward the exit, and her father shook Sinclair's hand. Though no words were exchanged, her father's expression conveyed immense appreciation, which she interpreted as affirmation that she was on the right path with this study. This experience encouraged Dr. Morgan to consider how the study aligns with broader efforts to support Indigenous knowledges in post-secondary education, including the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015) Call to Action #62.2 that states:

We call upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, in consultation and collaboration with Survivors, Aboriginal [Indigenous] peoples, and educators, to: Provide the necessary funding to post-secondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms. (p. 7)

It exemplifies how dreams can provide guidance, ethical reflection, and relational insight, supporting decision-making and alignment with Gitxsan research principles throughout the project.

The study focuses on three distinct seasonal student midterm course experience surveys created by Dr. Morgan, Xwsit (Fall), Maadim (Winter), and Gwooyim/Sint (Spring/Summer), designed to reflect Gitxsan relationships to land, cyclical time, and ways of being. Developed as alternatives to standardized tools, these surveys embody Gitxsan principles of relationality, holistic well-being, non-linearity, and storytelling as pathways for knowledge sharing, ensuring evaluation processes are culturally responsive, relationally grounded, and aligned with community protocols.

The title of this study, *Ndehl Heehl Goodin?*, reflects an overarching question that guides both personal reflection and relational engagement in the work we do. It captures a principle that the research team, students, and Gitxsan community members alike are encouraged to ask of themselves and one another. This question was embedded as a guiding principle within the course surveys, shaping the way students reflected on their learning experiences and grounding the evaluation process in relationality, holistic understanding, and cyclical approaches to knowledge.

This study has two interconnected objectives: (1) to explore student experiences with a Gitxsan worldview-embedded midterm course evaluation, and (2) to engage Gitxsan community members in grounding and affirming the approach within Gitxsan ways of knowing. Rather than seeking to revise the evaluation tool, community engagement was intended to ensure that the work remains relationally accountable, culturally aligned, and reflective of Gitxsan epistemologies as understood beyond the classroom.

Preliminary Literature Review

Conventional approaches to research and evaluation in post-secondary education often rely on Western methodologies emphasizing quantitative metrics, objectivity, and linear

assessment (Justice Canada, 2020). While these approaches can offer measurable outcomes, they frequently overlook relational, cultural, and holistic dimensions of learning, particularly within Indigenous contexts. Indigenous pedagogical approaches foreground community, relationality, and the integration of land, language, and culture in knowledge acquisition and assessment (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). This review situates the present study within the broader discourse on Indigenous-centred evaluation, highlighting gaps in traditional midterm and end-of-course student feedback tools, and exploring how Gitxsan worldviews can inform culturally aligned evaluation practices. Indigenous frameworks for evaluation emphasize ethical engagement, reciprocity, and relational accountability, creating space for holistic student learning that transcends Western metrics (Absolon, 2011; Archibald, 2008).

Indigenous evaluation frameworks are grounded in principles that prioritize relationality, reciprocity, and community benefit (Cajete, 2000; Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008). These approaches contrast with conventional Western evaluation, which often prioritizes objectivity, standardization, and outcomes measured against predetermined criteria. Within Indigenous frameworks, knowledge is situated, contextual, and interconnected with culture, language, and land. Ethical engagement, cultural humility, and ceremony are essential components of evaluation processes, particularly when working with Indigenous communities (Absolon, 2011).

A growing body of scholarship has demonstrated the value of Indigenous frameworks in re-shaping assessment and evaluation practices in adult and post-secondary education. Projects such as the *First Nations Pedagogy for Online Learning* (Currie & Kind, 2008) have emphasized the use of Indigenous metaphors—such as canoe journeys and seasonal cycles, to create culturally grounded approaches to teaching and assessment. Similarly, the *Koh-Learning in our*

Watersheds project at the University of Northern British Columbia (UNBC; 2025) integrates a Dakelh “seasonal round” framework to connect learners with land-based cycles and Indigenous principles of relationality. Beyond educational contexts, the *Well Living House* has applied Indigenous metaphors such as rivers and blanket journeys to develop culturally embedded evaluation tools for Indigenous adults in health and wellness programs (Well Living House, 2025), while the *4 Seasons of Reconciliation* course employs seasonal metaphors to structure adult learning around reconciliation (Reconciliation Education, 2025). Collectively, these examples illustrate both the necessity and effectiveness of embedding Indigenous worldviews into assessment practices. Building on this foundation, the present study extends these insights by developing a Gitxsan-specific framework that embeds culturally meaningful metaphors within a hybrid evaluation tool, thereby contributing to the ongoing work of aligning higher education assessment with Indigenous knowledge systems.

For the Gitxsan people, who reside in northern BC along the Skeena River, relational and collective frameworks are central to social organization. Gitxsan society is structured around several villages, with members belonging to one of four clans: Lax̣ Skiik (Eagle), Lax̣ Gibuu (Wolf), Lax̣ Seel/Ganeda (Frog), or Gisk’aast (Fireweed) (Smith, 2004). Leadership and governance involve Sigidim Hanak (Matriarchs) and Sim’oogit (Hereditary Chiefs), and traditional knowledge is transmitted through li’ligit (Feasts) and lax_yip (Where our Language, Stories, Songs and Dances come from). These relational structures highlight that knowledge and accountability are collective, interdependent, and embedded in social networks. Evaluation tools designed for Gitxsan contexts, therefore, must reflect these social frameworks by privileging relationships, community accountability, and culturally grounded perspectives rather than solely individualistic or abstract measures.

Indigenous methodologies in research and evaluation emphasize participatory and decolonial approaches, which challenge Western assumptions about knowledge production and assessment (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2004; Tuck & Yang, 2012; Wilson, 2008). Decolonial approaches prioritize dismantling colonial power dynamics embedded in institutional practices, centring Indigenous voices, and respecting sovereignty and self-determination. Positionality, acknowledging who is conducting the research, who is providing feedback, and how perspectives are interpreted, is crucial for culturally responsive evaluation (David-Chavez & Layden, 2022). Emerging models in Indigenous community health, language revitalization, and child welfare highlight the value of storytelling, oral histories, and culturally embedded metrics for assessing outcomes that matter to communities (Archibald, 2008; Cajete, 2000).

Conventional student evaluation systems, such as midterm surveys and end-of-course evaluations (e.g., the Course Experience Survey [CES]), rely on standardized Likert scales and anonymous online submissions. While widely used, these tools have been criticized for perpetuating settler-colonial norms and assumptions of neutrality and objectivity, overlooking cultural, social, and relational contexts. As a result, they can produce inequities in multiple ways: instructors may receive biased, discriminatory, or hostile feedback (Heffernan & Harpur, 2023), while students from marginalized backgrounds may experience erasure of their perspectives, feel unsafe to share their experiences, or have their learning needs overlooked, which can reinforce structural inequities in classroom environments and course design (Ahmed, 2012; Heffernan & Harpur, 2023, in discussion of institutional practices).

Few Indigenous-developed evaluation tools exist within post-secondary contexts, and even fewer have been implemented in actual classroom assessments. Existing tools emphasize relational engagement, community accountability, and narrative-based feedback, privileging

context and positionality over abstract metrics (Absolon, 2011; Wilson, 2008). Critical pedagogues such as Bell Hooks (1994), Paulo Freire (2000), and Sara Ahmed (2012), further illuminate how conventional evaluation can reinforce institutional power dynamics and marginalize learners and instructors from non-dominant cultural perspectives, highlighting the importance of considering positionality, power, and relational ethics when designing culturally responsive assessment tools.

At the University of Victoria, the Indigenous Plan (2023) and Elder-in-Residence model exemplify institutional support for relationship-based accountability and culturally responsive pedagogy. Gitxsan-centred evaluation in post-secondary courses can draw upon these structures while addressing gaps in conventional feedback systems. The teachings of the late Elder Dr. Skip Dick, Songhees Nation, include the principle of using words to lift others up (University of Victoria, 2023), providing ethical guidance for developing evaluation tools that promote relational accountability.

Despite growing attention to Indigenous evaluation frameworks, few studies have examined the practical application of these approaches within classroom feedback. Most literature focuses on theoretical frameworks or community-based research, leaving a notable gap in how these principles can be applied to post-secondary course evaluations. This study addresses this gap by piloting a Gitxsan worldview-embedded midterm evaluation tool in an asynchronous social work course. By centring student and community perspectives, the study explores preliminary approaches to culturally aligned feedback, relational accountability, and holistic assessment, laying the groundwork for larger, multi-course investigations.

Methods

This study was conducted from December 2024 to November 2025, supported by a \$5,000 award through an internal teaching and research grant with the Faculty of Human and Social Development. The project was approved by the University of Victoria Human Research Ethics Board (application #25-0024). The study was led by Dr. Jenny Morgan, Gitxsan, Assistant Teaching Professor in the University of Victoria Social Work program, with support from Sinensxw /Jessica Starlund, Gitxsan/Nuu-chah-nulth research assistant, grounding the project in culturally informed leadership and methodological integrity.

This study follows a Storywork-guided Indigenous research methodology (Archibald, 2008), which emphasizes respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, interrelatedness, and synergy. Storywork principles informed the project's overall design, data collection, analysis, and dissemination, ensuring alignment with Gitxsan epistemologies and relational ethics. While both student and community interviews used structured prompts, the approach for community members was guided more explicitly by Storywork, emphasizing relational engagement, attentiveness to context, and culturally grounded communication.

In practice, two former students of Dr. Morgan were interviewed using conventional audio recording and transcription methods. For Gitxsan community members, no audio or video recordings were made; instead, the PI and RA conducted conversational interviews guided by Storywork principles, taking detailed reflective notes and journaling observations. Direct quotes were not captured verbatim; rather, the records reflect the spirit, intent, and relational context of participants' contributions. This approach ensured ethical engagement, respected community protocols, and supported relational accountability, while capturing rich insights into local perspectives.

Data from both student interviews and community discussions were then analyzed thematically to identify key patterns, insights, and emergent themes. Storywork principles guided interpretation, ensuring that the analysis remained grounded in Gitxsan worldviews and relational epistemologies.

The pilot Gitxsan worldview-embedded midterm evaluation survey process included an introductory learning phase, in which students engaged with contextual materials to situate within Gitxsan knowledge systems and seasonal practices. Students were presented first with a song, a practice encouraged to promote receptivity in learners (Archibald, 2008), using a video created by Gitxsan youth (Nwe Jinan, 2023). A story from Xsiwis/Dr. M. Jane Smith's dissertation (Smith, 2004), featuring a Gitxsan story on reincarnation, was then shared to further situate students within relational and cultural contexts. These narratives prompted reflection on students' own values, beliefs, and connections to land and community. After engaging with these materials, students completed the seasonal survey, which was framed using analogies and examples drawn from seasonal Gitxsan practices, such as fishing, hunting, and food gathering, guided by the Rez-ilience Framework (Wale & Parrott, 2024). By integrating both student perspectives and guidance from Gitxsan community members, this project opens dialogue about Indigenous-centred evaluation practices and lays the foundation for larger-scale research that may inform midterm and end-of-course assessment tools across higher education.

All participants were recruited through purposeful sampling. Two past students of SOCW 462 (*Indigenous Resistance, Resurgence, and Decolonial Practice*), an asynchronous course developed by Dr. Morgan, participated in the study. This was the course in which the pilot Gitxsan worldview-embedded midterm evaluation tool was first introduced (see Appendix B). At the midpoint of the course, students were invited to provide consent for possible participation in

future research; six were contacted, and two were available to take part. Prior to the interview, the students received a copy of the survey where some questions were: “Similar to how fishing requires knowledge of the waters, thus far has the course helped you cast your net wider in understanding the historical and ongoing impacts of colonialism on Indigenous peoples in Canada?,” “As vital as knowing the seasons and tides for successful hunting or fishing how relevant do you find the discussions on Indigenous peoples’ resistance and revitalization efforts to your understanding of social work practice?,” and “In what ways do you think this course encourages you to 'give back' to your community, similar to how traditional hunting and fishing practices emphasize sharing and giving back?” The survey was a mix of multiple-choice answers and open-ended, reflective prompts.

We are thankful for the opportunity to also interview Gitxsan community members to help frame this work and ground it in local perspectives. The ethics board protocol was amended to include community participants, and approval was obtained prior to data collection. Four community members participated: three Matriarchs (respected women) and one Sim’oogit (Hereditary Chief). They were identified and invited through familiar relations, community connections, and established trust. To reflect varied experiences, two resided on-reserve and two off-reserve. All participants received an honorarium in recognition of their time and contributions. Student participants were provided with a \$50 gift card, and community members received compensation via \$100 electronic transfer, reflecting the additional time and engagement required.

Data Collection

Student participants engaged in recorded interviews, which were transcribed. For Gitxsan community members, a Storywork approach was used (Archibald, 2008). Storywork provided a

culturally aligned methodology for gathering community knowledge. Interviews were not recorded; instead, the Gitxsan interviewers took notes and journaled reflections afterward to honour oral traditions and relational accountability. All data were stored securely on password-protected computers, with access limited to the research team, in accordance with the University of Victoria's Human Research Ethics Board requirements. Engagement with Gitxsan community members was not intended to extract feedback for the purpose of revising the evaluation tool, but rather to ensure that the approach reflected and remained accountable to Gitxsan knowledge systems, relational protocols, and lived community perspectives. This reflects an understanding that, as Gitxsan researchers, our work is already situated within these epistemologies, while still requiring ongoing relational grounding beyond the academic context.

Analysis

Student transcripts and Storywork notes were reviewed collaboratively by the research team. For students, the interviews provided feedback on their experience completing the survey and evaluation process. For Gitxsan community members, the discussions helped ground the work in local perspectives and affirmed and deepened the cultural grounding of the approach, ensuring alignment with Gitxsan ways of knowing and relational practices.

Findings and Results

Below are the findings/themes that emerged from the Gitxsan community members individually interviewed. They have been given the pseudonyms of River, Sky, Cedar, and Willow. These interviews were done to engage with Gitxsan community members and continue to ground this work moving forward. Direct quotes that appear are drawn from interviewer notes. They are not intended as word-for-word records but as faithful reflections of the spirit of what

was shared, offered in a way that allows participants' voices to be present while respecting the relational nature of Storywork.

Wila Sawitxwt: Identity/Luu Hoksxwit: Belonging

Across participants, Gitxsan worldview was consistently understood as a source of identity, grounding people in who they are and how they live. For some, worldview was expressed most clearly through the feast system, wilp (house groups), and ayook (law), while for others it was described in terms of community, family, and never being alone. These perspectives highlight how Gitxsan worldview cannot be reduced to a belief system alone but is instead lived daily through kinship, responsibilities, and collective identity. River emphasized "Our wilp, our feast system. How that is a fabric of our society (of Gitxsan people)," highlighting its foundational role within Gitxsan social structure. Sky described it as inseparable from law and protocol, stating "The most important word I would say, 'this is our protocol as Gitxsan people,' which means this is our Ayook (Law)," emphasizing the relationship between protocol and Gitxsan legal orders. Willow expressed this as belonging, explaining "Gitxsan means knowing you are never alone, we have our community to go back to. For example, when someone dies, the community comes together to be with the family," illustrating the relational and communal dimensions of identity and support.

Lax̱ Yip: Where our Language, Stories, Songs and Dances come from

The land emerged as central to Gitxsan worldview, not only as a source of sustenance but also as the very substance of being. Participants described the land as shaping identity, responsibility, and spiritual connection. Memories of fishing, hunting, and camping reflected how teachings are tied to land-based practices and stories. The land was also linked to rights and title, court cases, and the responsibilities of future generations to protect and uphold these

connections. River explained, “I think the land created us. We eat the salmon that comes from the land, and it turns into our molecules. In other words, ‘we are the land.’” Sky noted the grounding and healing qualities of the territory: “It’s a place away from the chaos of the world today.

There’s a sense of peace and spirituality when you are out on the land. It has a positive impact on your mental health.” Cedar highlighted the political and legal dimension:

It’s important today, when people want to come to the land, they must work with the First Nations, they have the right and title to the land. This is First Nations land. No one can just come onto territories, because court cases like Delgamuukw.

Aluut’aa Siwilaaksa: Teachings

Teachings were described as being passed down primarily through family, Elders, feasts, and direct participation in Gitxsan systems. The learning process was often characterized as apprenticeship, where youth follow and observe those with more experience, gaining knowledge through repetition and daily practice. Participants also emphasized the role of language in transmitting worldview, underscoring the need for revitalization and immersion. River reflected, “I would say it’s like participating in the system and it’s like an apprenticeship because you are always following your teachers around and observing, it’s repetition.” Sky spoke to the role of hard work: “Don’t be lazy. ‘Your eyes will tell you what to do’ in reference to being a hard worker, open to learning, especially hands-on learning with preservation and harvesting.” Cedar noted the importance of language: “Once you lose language, you lose your culture. You can share how you feel in a language, in English you are limited. If you know your language, you can speak from how you want to say things.”

Heek’al: Responsibility

Being Gitxsan is closely tied to responsibility toward land, one’s wilp, clan, community, language, and future generations. This sense of obligation was both practical, such as supporting

families during feasts or when someone is sick, and cultural, such as keeping traditions alive and teaching youth. Responsibility was not viewed as optional but as a defining part of Gitxsan worldview. River summarized this clearly: “Being there for your clan, being there for your wilp (house group), being there for your system.” Sky connected responsibility to intergenerational continuity: “To keep our culture alive. To share what we were taught and pass that down to the next generation.” Cedar emphasized care for others: “Always have to look after each other. Doesn’t just go for immediate family, it’s helping others as well. For example, feast system in the community. When someone is sick, people help each other.” Willow spoke directly to the youth:

When I think about the future generation of Gitxsan I want to tell them don’t be afraid to ask for help. So many of our people are afraid, but the community is always there for them. They are never alone.

Additional Reflections

Participants also shared insights that stood on their own. Sky reminded that “learning is never ending. Your roles and responsibilities will increase as you get older. Listen to the Elders and the knowledge keepers.” Cedar looked to the future with a message for coming generations: “Stay connected to knowing your clan, where you are from, knowing your great grandparents, what they went through to make it easier for you. Always try to do the same for your next generations to come.” Willow closed with pride and affirmation: “I love being Gitxsan. I’m proud to be Gitxsan. It’s from my mom’s side of the family and has shaped who I am today.”

Below are the findings/themes that emerged from the students individually interviewed. They have been given the pseudonyms of Hope and Star.

Nada K’i’yhl T’il Ts’iipxwit: Engagement

The evaluation fostered active engagement with the course material. Unlike conventional midterm surveys, which often rely on generic, quantitative measures, this evaluation encouraged

students to consider how the course affected their knowledge, values, and personal growth. Following customs and protocols, with permission, and that are available resources, the integration of Gitxsan stories, songs, and seasonal framing enhanced this engagement, creating a reflective and immersive experience. As Hope shared, "just questions about, you know, something bigger than myself, right? You were thinking about the land and communities and different ways of life and all in the context of like evaluating a course." Similarly, Star described how "it got me thinking, I guess you could say because it was something different and it wasn't just a straightforward, I'm evaluating something else. It was very much... a more immersive kind of reciprocal process." Both students recognized the evaluation's innovative format, visuals, video, and storytelling, as a key factor in making the process meaningful, with Hope noting that "The format... the pictures... it was really positive and innovative."

Hosim Ho Sagayt K'i'yhl Gagoodiit: Relationality

The evaluation foregrounded relationships with land, language, community, and culture, situating learning within Gitxsan worldviews. The stories and songs created a relational context that enriched their reflection and connected the evaluation directly to lived experience, with Star noting that "the songs... they just set the mood for the questions." Relational framing also encouraged students to reflect on their values and worldviews, as Hope described how the evaluation "challenged my worldview... made you stop and think about alternate ways of life."

Sityeekwsit: Transformation

The evaluation prompted cultural learning, emotional engagement, and critical reflection on conventional educational practices. Both Star and Hope observed that the evaluation introduced new cultural knowledge, such as Gitxsan stories on reincarnation and seasonal practices, fostering deeper understanding of Indigenous perspectives. As Star noted, "I learned

about reincarnation,” while Hope reflected that the evaluation “brought up... how Western cultures view your life... and this is a whole story bringing in reincarnation and relatives coming back.”

Students also recognized the evaluation’s potential to challenge colonial norms in education. Star described it as “yeah, I guess it’s a step for sure... in a very big world of things that need to happen,” while Hope emphasized that “It’s helping to decolonize... expanding and challenging colonial worldviews... that’s very objective and impersonal.” The experience may influence how they approach learning and evaluations in the future. Star noted that “I noticed right after... other courses were very starkly different,” while hope suggested that “it will allow me to see different types of evaluations... and question “objective” systems that may be harmful.”

Discussion

This pilot study provides preliminary insights into how midterm course evaluations can be decolonized and grounded in Indigenous worldviews, specifically through a Gitxsan epistemological lens. By centring relationality, holistic well-being, and cyclical approaches to learning, the findings highlight the potential for evaluations to move beyond conventional standardized surveys, which often fail to capture lived experiences and relational knowledge.

Relational and Holistic Engagement

Both students and community members emphasized the importance of relational and holistic approaches to evaluation. Students described the surveys as prompting reflection not just on course content but on their personal values, connections to land, and ways of knowing, as Star highlights “it made me think about how I connected my learning to my own connection to the land that I’m on.”

The Gitksan worldviews shaped not only the overarching principles of relationality and holism but also the design of the evaluation itself. For example, surveys were framed using seasonal and land-based metaphors, such as harvesting, preparation, and transition, to reflect cyclical understandings of time and knowledge transmission. Open-ended reflective prompts invited students to consider their relationships to land, community, and their own responsibilities within learning spaces, aligning directly with Gitksan teachings on interconnection, accountability, and cyclical learning. These design choices operationalized Gitksan epistemologies in concrete ways, affirming that the evaluation process mirrored the values and worldviews emphasized by community members.

We can see how community members reinforced these perspectives, emphasizing accountability to family, *wilp* (house groups), and the broader system, as well as the need to embed cyclical, land-based teachings in learning and evaluation. For example, River highlighted that participation in feasts and observing the land was key to understanding responsibility within the Gitksan system, noting, “we eat the salmon that comes from the land, and it turns into our molecules... we are another extension of the land like the trees, water from that territory.”

Cultural Grounding and Storywork

Storywork principles provided a framework for ethically and relationally engaging Gitksan participants. Community interviews foregrounded oral traditions, cyclical knowledge, and relational accountability, which collectively serve as a starting point for understanding and operationalizing a Gitksan worldview in higher education contexts. This approach also underscores the role of narrative, song, and story in cultivating reflective learning and relational evaluation practices.

Decolonizing Standardized Surveys

The findings illuminate harms embedded in conventional midterm and end-of-course evaluations. Anonymous surveys, while seemingly neutral, can enable discriminatory comments and fail to capture relational and cultural learning. By contrast, culturally grounded tools encourage accountability, reflection, and reciprocity. Participants described feeling seen, supported, and connected through the surveys, offering a model for how Indigenous knowledge systems can be operationalized in assessment.

Alignment with TRC (2015) Call to Action #62.2

This work speaks directly to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Action #62.2, which urges:

We call upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, in consultation and collaboration with Survivors, Aboriginal [Indigenous] peoples, and educators, to: Provide the necessary funding to post-secondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms. (p.7)

This call reflects the broader responsibility of higher education to support Indigenous educators, curricula, and evaluation methods. While this pilot study represents only a small-scale effort, it responds in spirit to this call and signals the significant work still required. There is much more to be done to fully integrate Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies, and assessment approaches at institutional levels, and to ensure meaningful, sustained collaboration with local Nations.

Implications for Teaching and Future Research

This study demonstrates that integrating Indigenous epistemologies can enhance relational learning and course evaluation. The findings provide a foundation for larger-scale research, including investigations across multiple Nations and universities. Community member insights provide guidance for developing culturally responsive evaluation methods, while

signaling the importance of ongoing engagement with local communities to ensure authenticity, accountability, and respect for Indigenous knowledge systems.

Future Directions

Moving forward, this work offers a model for researchers and Indigenous scholars seeking to engage meaningfully with their communities. Larger studies could explore the adaptation of midterm and end-of-course surveys across multiple institutions, emphasizing partnership with local Nations and careful attention to land, language, and community protocols. Further, this research opens a pathway for universities to begin naming and addressing the harms of conventional standardized evaluations, creating space for culturally responsive and decolonized assessment practices that honour Indigenous ways of knowing. Given the context-specific nature of this evaluation tool, future research should explore how it might be adapted with other Indigenous nations or diverse cultural backgrounds. Key questions include: How can the evaluation tool be culturally and relationally aligned in new contexts? What processes should instructors and institutions follow to build relationships, engage in reciprocal dialogue with Indigenous communities, and collaboratively design evaluation approaches that are meaningful and appropriate for their classroom and context?

Limitations, Gaps, and Tensions

As an exploratory pilot, this study was intentionally small in scope. Two students participated, although six were invited; thus, findings cannot be generalized to the broader student body. Similarly, four Gitxsan community members were engaged, and all were connected to a few Gitxsan villages, where there are several distinct villages. Broader engagement across all Gitxsan communities would strengthen the cultural representation and diversity of perspectives. In addition, the project was limited by the modest scale of funding, which

constrained the capacity for deeper or longer-term engagement with students and community members.

The use of Storywork represented a deliberate decolonizing methodological choice. While colonial research frameworks might perceive the absence of audio recordings and verbatim transcripts as a limitation, we position it as a strength. Storywork resists extractive forms of data collection and instead privileges memory, reflection, and relational accountability. This approach honours Gitxsan oral traditions while also challenging dominant academic expectations, offering an example of how Indigenous methodologies can reshape research practice.

Finally, as the study was situated within a single course, SOCW 462, the findings reflect a specific curricular and pedagogical context. A larger, more comprehensive study involving multiple courses and instructors would be necessary to further develop and validate Indigenous-centred evaluation tools in higher education.

Conclusion

Building on the guiding principles of this study, a dream experienced by Dr. Morgan early into the project affirmed the direction of the work, reflecting Gitxsan epistemologies where dreams provide guidance and relational insight. This pilot study demonstrates that midterm and end-of-course evaluations can move beyond conventional standardized surveys by centring Indigenous ways of knowing. By integrating relational, holistic, and cyclical approaches, and by foregrounding student and Gitxsan community perspectives, the study highlights the value of culturally grounded, ethically responsible evaluation practices. Feedback from students and community members emphasized reflection, accountability, and connection to land, teaching, and community. In doing so, this work responds in spirit to Truth and Reconciliation (2015)

Commission Call to Action #62.2, which urges post-secondary institutions to “provide the necessary funding to post-secondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms.” (p. 7)

The study provides an entry point for larger research projects, offering a model for Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars to engage meaningfully with local Nations, centre community voices, and develop assessment tools that honour Indigenous epistemologies and cultural protocols. This guiding theme is captured in the title of the project itself, serving as both a methodological and philosophical touchstone: “Ndehl Heehl Goodin?” (How are you feeling? What is your heart telling you?).

In the closing of this study, Gitxsan epistemologies (Smith, 2004) came full circle when Dr. Morgan experienced another dream when drafting this manuscript. The dream reflected the challenges and guidance inherent in this work. In the dream, she was in a house and being accosted by hostile individuals. Her late father arrived and asked if she wished to leave; she said yes, and he led the way out. They navigated steep rocky steps, a challenging terrain for both, yet he guided her safely. She found her way through a crowd and eventually returned to the house to find the hostile people gone, replaced by a supportive friend. This dream resonated with and returned to the methodological framework that had guided the project from its inception, affirming the direction of the study.

The dream illustrates how Indigenous epistemologies, such as those of the Gitxsan, can offer relational guidance and insight throughout the research process. It resonates with the methodological approach guiding this study. It highlights the importance of relational guidance of the ancestral spiritual realm in navigating difficult and entrenched systems, reflecting both the personal and collective labour involved in confronting colonial institutions. The steep, rocky

steps symbolize the challenging terrain of decolonizing evaluation processes, while the presence of trusted guides underscores the necessity of relational support. Finally, returning to find the house transformed signifies the possibility of creating space within institutions that often articulate commitments to change yet continue to embody colonial structures.

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Appendix A

Glossary of Key Terms

Aboriginal/Indigenous - Used interchangeably to refer to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples.

Aluut'aa siwilaaksa (Teachings) - Cultural knowledge, lessons, and wisdom passed through storytelling, ceremony, Elders, feasts, and lived or direct experience.

Ayook (Law/Protocol) - Gitxsan legal and social framework guiding behavior, responsibilities, and relationships within community.

Cultural Grounding - Integration of local Indigenous knowledges, stories, songs, and seasonal practices into learning or evaluation.

Decolonial Education/Pedagogy - Approaches to teaching and assessment that challenge colonial power structures, privilege Indigenous knowledge systems, and centre relational and community-based learning.

Decolonizing/Decolonial Practice - Challenging colonial norms, power structures, and standard assessment approaches by centering Indigenous knowledge, values, and relationality.

Feast System/Wilp - Wilp (house groups) and associated feasts as central organizational and cultural units of Gitxsan society, structuring social, political, and ceremonial life.

Gitxsanimx (Gitxsan language) - The language of the Gitxsan people, used to express cultural knowledge and worldview, including translations of thematic findings.

Heek'al (Responsibility) - Ethical obligations to community, clan, wilp, and the land, including care, accountability, stewardship, and cultural transmission to future generations.

Hosim ho sagayt k'i'yhl gagoodiit (Relationality) - Emphasizes the interconnectedness of people, land, community, and knowledge, guiding ethical and relational interactions.

Lax̣ yip (Land) - Where our Language, Stories, Songs and Dances come from. Territory, environment, and the ethical and spiritual relationships humans have with the land; central to cultural identity, knowledge, and practices.

Luu hoksxwit (Belonging) - Feeling connected, accepted, and supported within a community, family, clan, or cultural group.

Midterm Course Evaluation/Course Experience Survey (CES) - Conventional academic assessment tools, often anonymous and quantitative, used to collect student feedback about courses; critiqued for perpetuating settler-colonial norms and overlooking relational, cultural, and holistic contexts.

Nada k'i'yhl t'il ts'iipxwit (Engagement / Connection) - Reflects active participation, emotional and relational connection, and involvement in learning, culture, or community activities.

Ndehl Heehl Goodin? (How are you feeling? / What is your heart telling you?) - Central guiding question of the study, used in surveys to foster reflection and relational engagement.

Positionality - Acknowledgment of the researcher's identity, background, and relationships, and how these influence research design, data collection, and interpretation.

Relational/Holistic Learning - Learning approaches that integrate culture, land, relationships, and reflection, emphasizing interconnectedness over abstraction or standardized measures.

Sigidim Hanak (Matriarchs) - Respected women in Gitxsan society holding social and cultural authority.

Sim'oogit (Hereditary Chief) - Leadership role in Gitxsan governance structures.

Sityeekwsit (Transformation) - Personal, cultural, or educational growth resulting from engagement, reflection, or learning processes.

Storywork - An Indigenous research methodology emphasizing relationality, ethics, respect, responsibility, reverence, reciprocity, holism, and synergy (Archibald, 2008), used to ethically engage participants and interpret knowledge.

Wilp (House Group/Clan Unit) - Organizational unit in Gitksan society representing family lineage, governance, and ceremonial responsibilities.

Wila sawitxwt (Identity) - The sense of self, cultural belonging, and understanding of one's place within community, clan, and lineage.

Appendix B

Seasonal Survey Process (with instructions and any accompanying materials, e.g., song/video description, story excerpt).

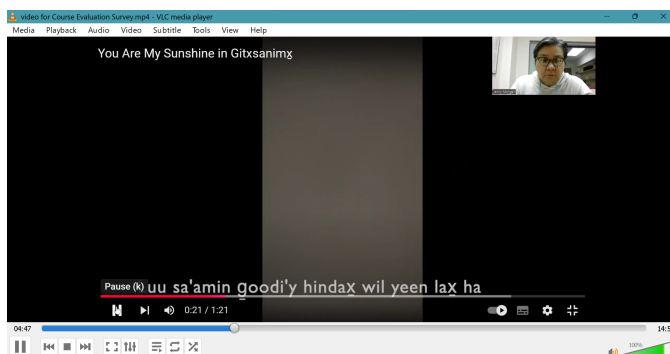
Setting the foundation, a video following protocols of introducing the survey that is grounded in teachings shared through the creation of the Rez-iliance Framework (Wale, J. D., & Parrott, L., 2024). A process that centre's Gitxsan worldviews, song, and story. Later versions of the video include an introduction of the Gitxsan people, location, history. The process follows the Indigenous Storywork: Educating the heart, mind, body, and spirit (Archibald, 2008) by sharing a song before a story is told.

1. Introduction of Survey by Dr. Jenny Morgan.



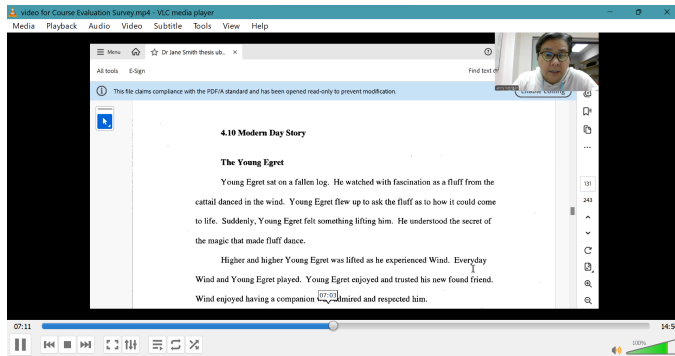
2. Sharing a video/song by fluent Gitxsan speaker Xsiwis , Dr. Jane Smith, to offer students a chance to hear a contemporary song in Gitxsanimx (the Gitxsan language).

[https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-5OrOHntTjU&list=RD-5OrOHntTjU&start_radio=1]



3. Sharing a story, excerpt from Xsiwis, Dr. Jane Smith's thesis titled Placing Gitxsan Stories in Text: Returning the Feathers. Guuxs Mak'Am Mik'Aax.

[<https://open.library.ubc.ca/soa/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/831/items/1.0054675>]



4. Students are then invited to sit quietly and reflect on their values, stories, community, then complete the following survey.