

Indigenous Writing Retreats: Native American community members and scholars in action!

Rodney C. Haring^{1,2}, lehnhotonkwas Bonnie Jane Maracle⁵, Priscilla R. Sanderson^{1,3}, Whitney Ann E. Henry², Donna Grandbois^{1,4}, Erik Brodt¹, Pete Hill⁶

Hampton Faculty Fellow, Spirit of EAGLES, Mayo Clinic Comprehensive Cancer Center, Rochester, MN¹, Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center, Cancer Prevention and Population Sciences, Office of Cancer Health Disparities Research², Northern Arizona University, College of Health and Human Services, Health Sciences Department^{1,3}, North Dakota State University, College of Health Professionals, Department of Public Health⁴ Kanatsiohareke Mohawk Community⁵, Native American Community Services, Inc.⁶

* Corresponding author email: rodney.haring@roswellpark.org

ABSTRACT

Writing retreats provide time away from distractions to write manuscripts, grant applications, books, or dissertations. A unique characteristic of writing retreats is that they form a “community of scholars,” which is culturally congruent with Indigenous intellectuals, who are familiar with community as an essential way of life. This perspective piece presents experiences from a national cohort of Indigenous scholars (n=6) and viewpoints from a series of Indigenous writing retreats (n=22). Feedback from aggregated writing retreats endorses the feasibility, growth, and advocacy of future writing retreats and study. Shared outlooks included protected writing times, which produced increased productivity, mentorship, traditional advisement, blended with core values related to a community-based participatory research framework.

KEYWORDS: Writing retreat, Indigenous, American Indians, Native American, Haudenosaunee, education, minority, community based participatory research, CBPR, public health

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INTRODUCTION

Writing retreats are becoming an integral part of academic literature. Retreats often provide a period away from distractions and are dedicated to writing papers, manuscripts, grant applications, books, or putting the finishing touches on a project (Rosser, Rugg, & Ross, 2001; Cable, Boyer, Colbert, & Boyer, 2013). This dedication includes investigators writing research proposals that cycle from one project to another quickly, making it challenging to find productive time to produce manuscripts (Rosser, Rugg, & Ross, 2001). One unique characteristic of writing retreats is the composition of diverse learners, their educational backgrounds, creativity, and community members' participation. Writing retreats often include on-site mentorship and writing tutors, who play a critical role in providing the on-demand guidance and support needed to finish projects (Jackson, 2009; Cable, Boyer, Colbert, & Boyer, 2013).

Community is essential to American Indian culture and a way of life for many American Indian, First Nations, or Native American peoples, who will be noted in this article as Indigenous. Therefore, creating a community within a writing retreat is a significant aspect of planning these gatherings. The notion of a "community of scholars" (Spears, 2004 in Jackson, 2009) creates an ideal atmosphere for Indigenous scholars, bringing together traditional and scientific means to complete projects. Further, organized Indigenous-specific writing retreats are a relatively new phenomenon in academia and are increasingly becoming a much-needed element in Indigenous landscapes. With the growing number of Indigenous people throughout North America pursuing higher levels of education (National Center for Educational Statistics (2016). Retrieved

from http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2008/nativetrends/ind_6_1.asp) and being involved in proposal- and report-writing, developing business plans, writing books and articles, it has become more and more important that time and an appropriate place be prepared purposely so that writing tasks can be worked on without unwarranted distraction. Because Indigenous people are hereditarily communal beings, it stands to reason that they would instinctively be empowered to complete their tasks when working together in a modern shared working-living environment (Haring, Hudson, Erickson, Taulii, & Freeman, 2014).

The Indigenous-based retreat becomes a cooperative venture in writing, regardless of the required product itself. An inspired production process is a result of the writing members in a short-term community having the opportunity to share ideas and concerns about their present tasks, listen to each other's stories of struggles and good fortune regarding their work and, most importantly, gain advice from others' experiences in navigating and completing similar writing tasks. Indigenous writing retreats are also a means to socialize, interact, and learn with communities during down times.

Modeling is parallel to what is perceived as social learning theory. Social learning theory shares that individuals acquire beliefs from role models, close friends, social environmental situations, and their parents (Bandura, as cited in Petraitis, Flay, & Miller, 1995). In relation to cultural sharing, social learning theory would predict that experience with cultural peers, families, environmental situations, parents, and extended family members may shape a person's or child's reason for learning his or her patterns, beliefs, and attitudes about tradition, ways of life, and resiliency factors. In Indigenous

contexts, Haring *et al.* (2016) used social learning theory in a workplace obesity prevention intervention in Native workforces, where it was noted to be successful. Previous work has also been accomplished using social learning and modeling with Indigenous populations in clinical frameworks (LaFromboise & Rowe, 1983). Further, modeling and community togetherness towards a productive and meaningful goal is also the premise for community-based participatory research, or CBPR. The CBPR process in the context of this paper involves sharing of culture, identity, and social interaction towards the social growth and interconnectedness of individual, family, and community involvement (Hicks *et al.*, 2012).

PERSPECTIVES AND PROCESS

Concepts shared include the experiences of an Indigenous cohort of scholars who attended an Indigenous-based writing retreat in the aboriginal landscapes of the Seneca Nation of Indians (Niagara Falls, NY). The second set of concepts shared includes perspectives from Indigenous writing retreat attendees who participated in a writing retreat in the aboriginal landscape of the Mohawk Indian Nation (Fonda, NY). Both areas are part of the Haudenosaunee, also known as the Iroquois, a confederacy of federally recognized Native Nations. There were originally five nations, later six (when the Tuscarora were included), which form the Haudenosaunee also known as the Iroquois Confederacy. The Mohawks are the easternmost, living in upstate New York's Mohawk Valley region, and the Senecas reside in the Western New York region (Snow, Gehring, & Starna, 1996).

A methods section is not included as this is a perspective piece based on points of view collected in an evaluative context for feedback. This included responses from multiple cohort retreat attendees (n=22) in combination with multiple scholars' (n=6) reflections. Scholars were Indigenous writers from across the U.S., while others participants were mainly tribal members from the Haudenosaunee. Participants included three faculty fellow cohorts, for a total of 10 scholars, who had a proven dedication to improving the quality of life of Indigenous peoples (seven were tribal members). Participants, as fellows and scholars, were part of the Mayo Clinic's Spirit of EAGLES Program, Hampton Faculty Fellowship (Kaur, Dignan, Burhasstipanov, Baukol, & Claus, 2006). The Spirit of EAGLES is a nationally funded Native American/Alaska Native-focused Community Networks Program Center consisting of research initiatives in research projects, community outreach, and training (retrieved from <http://www.nativeamericanprograms.org/index-spirit.html> on October 7, 2016). This unique fellowship was named in honor of the first Indigenous medical oncologist, James Hampton, M.D. These fellows were qualified health disparity researchers, dispersed across the country in varied academic and clinical practices, with experience in Community-Based Participatory Research and cancer prevention and control. Twenty-two others were participants in multiple cohorts of Indigenous writing retreats held in Mohawk Country.

Setting.

(Mayo Clinic, Hampton Faculty Fellows) - The Mayo Clinic, Spirit of EAGLES, Hampton Faculty Fellows and staff members attended a social evening with Indigenous community members in the aboriginal areas of the Haudenosaunee. The

Spirit of EAGLES, housed within the Mayo Clinic in Rochester, MN, supported the travel of the Hampton Faculty Fellows and staff members. The participants were also welcomed by the oldest comprehensive cancer center in the U.S., Roswell Park Comprehensive Cancer Center, which hosted the fellows for a campus visit (www.roswellpark.org, retrieved on October 7, 2016). The retreat was hosted in various venues, which included a hotel with writing space and small conference rooms, an Indigenous urban center (<http://www.nacswny.org/> retrieved on October 7, 2016) and a cancer institute with an academic setting.

(Kanatsiohareke) - The setting for the Mohawk retreat at Kanatsiohareke (Ga na jo ha lay gay) was a small rural community in the homelands of the Mohawk Nation along the northern shore of the Mohawk River in the Mohawk Valley of upper New York State. The community provides workshops on traditional teachings, Mohawk language and culture, spiritual understanding, and local historical sightseeing. Food preservation, basket-making, drum-making, leather-work, and other such traditional artisan workshops, and information sessions are also held regularly by Indigenous presenters who are experts in their fields. As an educational component to Kanatsiohareke's programming, along with the traditional talks, a language camp and cultural celebrations, the community began hosting a week-long writing retreat for Indigenous authors in December 2009. This became the first of four successful retreats hosted by Kanatsiohareke. Each season, the agenda changed based on program evaluation suggestions from previous years. A typical week may include breakfast, a discussion of the days' writing plans, writing time/quiet time, 1:1 writing coach time, if requested; lunch, more 1:1 writing

coach times, meeting with a spiritual liaison or academic counselor, if requested; writing/quiet time, and meeting to discuss the day's accomplishments *via* a round table, dinner, and either a cultural activity or a field trip in the region.

Description of the Intervention. The intervention goals of the writing retreats were to provide: 1. a quiet, cultural environment to work on writing requirements; 2. a space for Indigenous scholars to meet and exchange information on their research and writings; 3. time for the attendees to speak with academic and spiritual advisors (spiritual advisors were available at the Kanatsiohareke retreat only); and 4. the opportunity for attendees to gain answers to questions and words of encouragement regarding their research, writing and personal goals. Both events were planned to give writers in various areas and from an array of academic institutions an opportunity to gather together to share their research and ideas.

Participants at Kanatsiohareke were able to spend time with Traditional Advisors, who shared cultural teachings and provided insight on working in Indigenous communities and with Indigenous people. In subsequent retreats, an opportunity was given to meet one-on-one with both an Indigenous Ph.D. Advisor and a Traditional Spiritual Advisor. The academic advisor was available to lend information on his/her experiences going through academic writing tasks and to offer tips on successful completion of the required work for institutions of higher learning.

The Traditional Advisor at Kanatsiohareke was available to share cultural teachings with the writers and provide a sense of purpose and cultural connection in their research and writing. Individual advice was also available on maintaining personal health and wellness in what could be a

stressful time in completing their required work. For the Indigenous scholars and writers who were brought together for a week, the vision gained from that experience of living and working in the ancestral homelands of the Haudenosaunee provided greater inspiration and meaning to their work and thoughts.

OUTLOOKS

Perspectives from both of the Indigenous-based writing retreats were encouraging. A majority of on-site mentors at both retreats were Indigenous and held professional graduate degrees (i.e., Ph.D.). They also had a strong foundation in Indigenous community knowledge, culture, history, and tradition. During the time frame discussed in this paper, 28 writers attended retreats either through the Mayo Clinic's Hampton Faculty Fellowship (n=6) or over a three-year period at Kanatsiohareke's Indigenous Writing Retreats (n=22). The goals of the retreats were to develop, continue, or revise with new knowledge peer-reviewed articles, book chapters, grant applications, poetry, or non-fiction and fiction pieces.

Protected writing times. Overall findings indicated that writing retreats in the Indigenous landscape continued and grew, not only in these two venues, but among other Indigenous Nations, urban centers, and academic institutions. The results indicated that writing retreats were beneficial for those needing the time for uninterrupted writing. This corresponded with previous findings showing that writing retreat participants found the location away from their normal work place with no distractions a successful component of the writing retreat. That uninterrupted time was something

many experienced for the first time (Cable, Boyer, Colbert, & Boyer, 2013).

Providing for productive work. The writing retreats evolved as a space for Indigenous scholars, proposal writers, report writers, and authors. The retreats further developed as direct results of input and planning of ideas, concerns, and feedback. Both events provided an environment in which writing tasks were tackled and completed, academic suggestions and spiritual support were gained from noted Indigenous advisors, and networking with Indigenous peers became a lasting benefit.

Core Values of Haudenosaunee Communities. The Hampton Faculty Fellows shared views, perceptions, and experiential reactions from invited guests to observe a Haudenosaunee social gathering. The observations of these Fellows were unique because it gave them an opportunity to see tribal cultures from a different perspective in a community different from their own. It provided an additional opportunity to see public health in action through the eyes of these observers (outsiders), which resulted in the creation of a set of perceived core values from Haudenosaunee Communities that shaped public health.

We defined "community" as the interactions, activities, and relational experience among the people at the social ceremony, who shared a core value of culture. We distinguished community not as the specific people present, but as the core values of culture being expressed by those present at the social gathering. Culture in Indigenous perspectives goes back to the beginning of time; for example, many Indigenous cultures, including the Haudenosaunee, pray for seven generations in the past and seven generations in the future for

health and wellbeing. Indigenous peoples are always mindful of the seventh generations because every action and decision that is made will affect the seventh generation ahead. This mindset of looking for ways to benefit future generations coincides not only with academia but also with health research (Haring *et al.*, 2016). The opening "Thanksgiving Address" was given at the beginning of the community event that the Hampton Faculty Fellows attended at Native American Community Services in Buffalo, NY. The following were core values that emerged from participants who had experiences among the Haudenosaunee communities that translated into cultural wellbeing, which, in turn, influenced good writing health and promotion.

1. Throughout the evening social event, the attendees observed kinship and friendships strengthen with a common goal of community gathering; an oasis away from "home," reserves or Indian Country. This included a display of love from mothers, grandmothers, or a member of the community to babies, who were lovingly carried throughout the social dances. The babies heard and felt the water drum, horn-rattles, and the stick dance throughout the evening. This aspect of the social event deepened relationships and formed life-time friendships among everyone from babies to elders.
2. A Hampton Faculty Fellow served as a cultural broker and organized the event with local leaders. The definition of the process of cultural-brokering is a person or group of people who provide a means to network, connect, meet, and interact with communities and cultures. Traditionally speaking, Indigenous peoples are group-oriented, with a sense of cooperation (Johnson *et al.*, 2010).

This happens in a majority of Indigenous communities across Indian country. Finally, with only three days' notice, the event was disseminated online to the Indigenous urban population and neighboring tribes, i.e., email messages, Facebook, and listserv. The community gathering had nearly 100 inter-tribal people present at the evening social event.

3. If there was a feeling of being displaced from moving/visiting from "home," reserves or Indian Country, that feeling dissipated during the social event. Instead, a proud display of inter-tribal togetherness emerged. The Indigenous culture is in place in all settings within the Haudenosaunee -- urban or reservation based. It is not in the past but in the present moment of happiness. Before each social dance, introductions were given, explaining the dance and its meaning.
4. Throughout the evening, wisdom-holders (keepers) openly taught young men, women and children. They embraced their cherished moments of mentorship and responsibilities by carrying forward openings, songs, and cultural practices. For instance, youths (3 or 4 years of age) joined the singers in the center and picked up a drumstick and began singing. A mother grabbed her young son's hand to invite him to dance with her; he unwillingly went. However, moments later, his little sneakers stepped up and down to the beat as a huge smile on his face beamed from ear to ear.
5. We observed that dancing and aerobic exercise reduced pain in older members. The community dancers' physical tension was released through dancing and they became more flexible with each foot pounding the

floor up and down with increased natural rhythm. Elders were also helped by younger members of the audience to move about the event. Those who did not dance visited, joked and laughed, with their knees and feet moving up and down to the rhythm of the songs. These learned songs come from generations past up to the present day.

6. The meal at the gathering focused on traditional Haudenosaunee food ways; heirloom varieties of corn, beans, and squash continue to be grown and harvested by members of the community. Heirloom varieties of corn have been passed down in the community since time immemorial. Encounters with the Haudenosaunee and other tribes in the Northeast date back to the 1600s, when there was interest in the ways in which the Indigenous peoples ground corn and the changes that were made as they were introduced to non-Indigenous people and their tools (Beauchamp, 1898). By using traditional foods in ceremonies, a direct connection is made to ancestral consciousness, i.e., the traditional foods being consumed are directly descended from the plants historically used by the community. The nutritional content of the traditional corn is different from almost any contemporary sweet corns. There are different varieties of traditional corn, which should not be mistaken for the sweet yellow corn that is usually eaten, especially during the summer months. There is white corn, red corn (similar to white corn; different in color), flint corn, and black corn (Harrington, 1908). Some traditional corns contain anthocyanins, which reduce inflammation, cholesterol, and blood pressure, and lower the risk of obesity, diabetes and heart disease (Robinson, 2013).
7. The Hampton Faculty Fellows observed the modeling of generational behavior of social acceptance. The youth at the event followed and watched the ways their elders' interacted with each other, including leadership roles, communication-styles, and dancing. The traditional modeling of accepted social behaviors, as observed in one event by the Hampton Faculty Fellows, was a life-long learning experience for the youth.
8. An example of inclusion and respect by all members of the community was an enormous hand-embroidered blanket made by the community elders. The blanket was breathtaking, with different squares embellished with figures of a man and woman in matching regalia, representing the balance of masculine and feminine pairing. It was laid out on a frame in the middle of the floor for all to see and admire. One of the elders spoke about the various projects to raise funds for the Indigenous urban center. For example, the blanket was being raffled, with the proceeds going to the community as a donation from the elders.
9. The tribal language being spoken was an important aspect of each event that the Hampton Faculty Fellows visited. Before the dances, a welcome and instructions were given in the tribal language, as well as the acknowledgement of meals served as sustenance for community people. The openings and closings for each event were given to thank the Creator for providing nutritious traditional meals and to gain strength.
10. For Indigenous societies, traditional tribal songs are sung and revered. It is no different for the Haudenosaunee. The Haudenosaunee

songs were foreign to the Hampton Faculty Fellows from other tribal affiliations such as the Dine', the Turtle Mountain Band of Chippewa Indians, and Chippewa/Anishinaabe. During an open forum and in side conversations with elders, the place, importance and meaning of these traditional songs were shared.

11. The principles of peace, strength, and what is known as the Good Mind represent the core values of Haudenosaunee culture. In Mohawk, the principles of *skennen* (peace), *kariwiiio* (good word) and *kasastensera* (strength) serve as a foundation and guiding force. In Mohawk and other Haudenosaunee tribal philosophies, the people should strive for peace as individuals, communities and Nations. Peace, in essence, is more than just the absence of conflict or war, but is based on social development and healthy foundations. It also includes the ability to enact principles such as education. Further, it is a means of spiritual consciousness in which societies can frame their skills and resiliencies towards productive reason. In summary, when communities work towards peace, a good mind is developed. This occurs when people put their minds together with good intentions. When these values are followed, strength is developed that moves the community forward in healthy, productive and resilient ways (retrieved on October 21, 2015 from http://www.ipcb.org/resources/archived/akw_protocol.html).

DISCUSSION

An adjustment in timing and hosting procedures was considered at one of the writing retreats. At Kanatsiohareke, each registrant was provided with

separate accommodations, writing space, and meals. The community house made arrangements to have a cook prepare breakfast, lunch and supper daily for the participants so they could concentrate on only having to do their writing. Costs for the event, which mainly included cooking services, food expense, honoraria for advisors, accommodations, utilities, maintenance, and local travel, were shared, with donations or small grants received for the event and a minimal registration fee charged to each participant.

In the beginning, December was thought to be a good time of the year at Kanatsiohareke to invite Indigenous writers to work on getting some tasks completed during an otherwise hectic month. The four Indigenous Ph.D. students who registered for the first writing retreat were from different institutions. Unfortunately, due to stormy weather at the time, one of the registrants was unable to make it to the session. The feedback from this event, however, entailed strong recommendations to host the event again but perhaps during warmer, less hazardous weather.

The next writing retreat was therefore planned as an August event. The 10 registrants for this retreat had varied backgrounds as graduate students, writers preparing articles and reports, and others doing some personal journaling. There was an expressed appreciation for the community's quiet peaceful environment and the healthy meals that were provided. It was suggested, however, that the event be held earlier than August as most participants needed the time in mid-August to prepare for a return to their studies or teaching positions. There was also a concern expressed through the evaluations that participation in the event be open only to those who were Indigenous people in order to maintain a more focused

atmosphere of peer exchange and support for their writing goals. Another suggestion was to have the group meet daily to discuss their day's accomplishments and share any concerns with their writing.

With these recommendations in mind, the planning of the subsequent writing retreats saw a time-change for the event from August to July, and registration geared towards Indigenous writers and scholars. The July event went forward with nine participants and a repeat of the retreat format, with daily provisions of meals, time to speak personally with both the Ph.D. and Traditional Advisors, writing time, and social networking time. The attending Indigenous Ph.D. and Traditional Advisors were changed, but a gender balance continued for the meeting comfort of the participants. Time was slotted into this July daily schedule for a sharing circle in the late afternoon before dinner. The evenings remained a time for socializing, traditional talks and games, and storytelling. Feedback from this July group was positive and again participants were very thankful for the opportunity, time and space provided at Kanatsiohareke to accomplish writing tasks for their academic requirements, job tasks, and personal goals. A suggestion that came from the evaluations was to add to the schedule an opportunity for those who want to take a break to tour local historical sights while they are in the Mohawk homelands.

CONCLUSION

This article provides an overview of observations from the Hampton Faculty Fellows' experiences in the Haudenosaunee region as well as the accomplishments of the Kanatsiohareke

Community nestled in the aboriginal landscape of Mohawk Country. The Hampton Fellows' experience as well as that of the Indigenous writers at Kanatsiohareke has affirmed the heterogeneity of Indigenous Nations in the U.S. and Canada. Both academic and community projects provided a positive experience for the Hampton Faculty Fellows and other Indigenous writers.

The next steps include sharing and disseminating the foundational pieces of creating and building success stories of Indigenous-based writing retreats with more Indigenous Nations, academic institutions, and authors from various disciplines. Indigenous writing retreats can prove beneficial to Indigenous graduate students and writers if organized in other parts of the country, where the opportunity for uninterrupted writing could take place. The continued support of Indigenous scholars and writers will in turn provide benefits in the long-run to many Indigenous communities at large and perhaps other minority communities. The writing retreat as an event and over the course of time has proven to be a welcomed success not only for Indigenous scholars, but also for an increasing number of Indigenous professionals and writers from various programs and communities. Writing retreats not only have the ability to shape writing projects but they also provide a means to place these movements into public health action across Indigenous Nations for the betterment of the country's first inhabitants.

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Conflict of interest

The authors declare that no competing or conflict of interests exists. The funders had no role in writing of the manuscript or decision to publish.

Authors' contributions

Dr. Rodney C. Haring and lehnhotonkwas Bonnie Jane Maracle worked together on the conceptualization, process, and experience of organizing and implementing Indigenous writing retreats in two distinct settings. Dr. Priscilla R. Sanderson, Whitney Anne E. Henry, Dr. Donna Grandbois, and Dr. Erik Brodt equally contributed to collaborative writing and review of all sections. Mr. Pete Hill provided community perspective and partnership via his affiliation with Native American Community Services, Inc.

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