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SoTL in Process

More Hawk, Less Seagull: The Importance of Community-Led SoTL Research

ABSTRACT

This systematic reflection essay blends research and community engagement with Margaret Kovach's keynote address at the 2022 conference of the International Society of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) and with the co-authors' autoethnographic accounts reflecting on their challenges across Australia and the US in conducting ethically responsible SoTL scholarship. The essay is a call for engagement with community-led projects drawing on Neil Drew's (2006) metaphor of a seagull, who flies in, takes what it wants, and leaves a mess behind. Two stories provided by the co-authors invite further discussion into the hopeful challenges of conducting community-led SoTL research.

KEYWORDS

community-led scholarship, SoTL research, community engagement, ethics of reciprocity, autoethnography

We write with a bold and seemingly bizarre request for our colleagues who engage with *Teaching & Learning Inquiry*: be hawks—not seagulls. We write to our colleagues, but we also write to ourselves. Meaningful, community-focused research demands that researchers be hawks who lift a community and not seagulls who take what they want and leave a mess as they fly away.

Our avian imagery, and by extension the argument driving our reflection essay, is inspired by teaching and learning scholarship and our personal stories as community-focused researchers in two different spaces (remote, isolated Indigenous communities and the US Army) on two different continents (Australia and North America). We begin by introducing the seagull/hawk metaphor. We then glide over to our personal stories—not just highlighting what we have done well, but also highlighting where we have fallen short of our hope for being hawks. We conclude by landing on implications about sure footing enroute towards the flight path of being hawks for the broad *TLI* readership. In our implications, we connect with Kovach's (2022) keynote address at the 2022 conference of the International Society of the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL) in Kelowna, British Columbia, in which Kovach led us through scholarships and practices of self-reflection.

We start with seagulls, a bird from the gull family that is notorious for interrupting peaceful seaside afternoons by arriving in large numbers, squawking abrasively, stealing food, and leaving a mess in its wake! These characteristics—arriving, taking, and defecating—are characteristics of this bird Drew (2006) pointed to in "The Seagull Imperative." Drew is a social psychologist with experience working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities and groups. Drew argued that many university-

based researchers default to the seagull imperative in hopes of accumulating the necessary publications and grants needed to "scale the dizzying heights of academia" (40). For Drew, this seagull imperative is "an insidious form of academic corrosion eating away our commitment to principled practice" (40). More specifically, in this metaphor, the seagull is a "researcher or consultant who flies into the community; craps all over everything then leaves the community to tidy up the mess" (40). Drew invites us to discard the word "research" and take up the phrase "collaborative community project" (41). He invites us to "vest genuine ownership in the community and stay in for the long haul" (41). But he also understands that the "structure, purpose and function of traditional university research practices do not lend themselves to reflective practice and the development of long-term enduring collaborative relationships with the community" (41). Indeed, it is challenging to explain such work to grant-funders and promotion and tenure review committees. Arriving, taking, and leaving: these are traits of seagulls, traits born from neoliberal demands of higher education that expect more research, quicker research, cheaper research.

But we don't have to be seagulls.

We can be hawks.

Harry Pitt is an Indigenous Australian artist, who resides on Yuin nation. A proud Torres Strait Islander and Fijian man, Pitt is a member of the Woolyungah Indigenous Centre (WIC) community at the University of Wollongong (UOW) in Australia. Pitt is an accomplished visual artist who created an illustration to accompany a special issue of the International Journal of Work-Integrated Learning (IJWIL), published through the partnership of UOW and Woolyungah Indigenous Centre in Australia, University of Victoria in Le Nonet, British Columbia and University of Waikato in New Zealand (see Figure 1 below).

Figure 1. Harry Pitt created an image of a hawk for a special issue of a journal published through the partnership of several institutes of higher education.
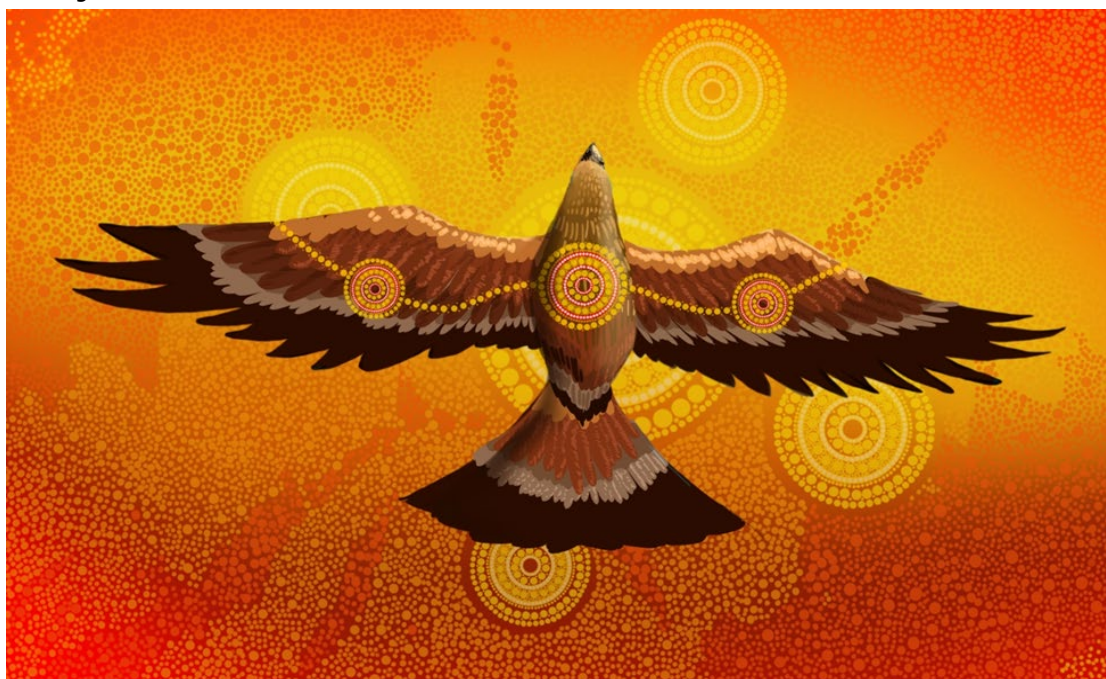
For Pitt, the hawk is a representation of "connectedness." The three circles on the wings and back of the hawk represent how the hawk lives in community with the sky, the land, and the waters. The editors of this special issue that included Pitt's image also understood the circles as representing community-led research: the connection between university, students, and community soaring together. The artwork by Pitt was gifted to represent the special issue, and we see the artwork and the gifting itself as pointing us toward more communally justice research: we all soar together; we give and receive and share knowledge together. We aim to be hawks.

Moving away from metaphor to practice, what does this look like? To help answer that question, we share our two individual stories. Our use of the noun "story" is intentional. We aim for story and storying because, according to Phillips and Bunda (2018), storying is "sitting and making emergent meaning with data slowly over time" (7). Storying assumes tellers and listeners (10) and storying "foreground[s] bodies (privileging sensation, emotion and spirit) and relationships" (12). We use "story" for our individual sections below because we focus on the into-becoming-ness of our experience, that we are still managing to understand fully (if we ever will). We use story with the hope that there is a listener, an audience, at the other end (you?!), and we use story committed to understanding our felt-sense, our visceral reactions, then and now, to what we experience when entering research spaces with community members. Our stories, then, in brief . . .

MICHAEL'S STORY

I work at the University of North Georgia (UNG) in the southeastern part of the United States of America. The US federal government designated UNG as a senior military college. This means a small percentage of the UNG student population is enrolled in the Reserve Officers Training Corps (ROTC). Students who enroll in ROTC are called cadets and are taking civilian and military classes in preparation for a career in the US Army after graduation.

My main teaching responsibilities are focused on academic writing courses for first-year students. Many of these students are cadets. The work I do in the class with cadets led me to read more about this unique student population and how writing factors into their current course work and their potential future in the US Army. I learned that writing is central to the work of the Army, and the Army has a definition of, what they term, the Army writing standard: "effective Army writing is understood by the reader in a single, rapid reading and is clear, concise, and well-organized" (US Army 2020, 1–38). As a SoTL researcher at heart, I focused on that definition and the cadets I had the opportunity to teach. With a co-researcher and the 700 or so cadets at UNG, I began a research journey in the community.

When I began this research project, I was not aware of the hawk and seagull metaphor. But I had spent time with scholars such as Smith (2012) and Patel (2015) who both articulated the rhetorical and material cost that comes with a term like "research" for many community groups. As they note, this term is one with a long-troubled past and present. While, as one reviewer of this essay correctly remarked, the US Army has long operated from a place of power, I did not want to research the army. I wanted to learn from the cadets who operated from a position of little agency within the army. I wanted to build a project, with my co-researcher and the cadets, that could illuminate how cadets understood academic writing, how they understood their writing development within higher education, and how their development might prepare them (or not) for potential careers in the army.

But to do this work, my co-researcher and I wanted to create space to hear from cadets and build research methods from methodologies that soared with cadets, instead of taking what we were interested in and flying away.

I worked closely with a group of cadets in a first-year writing class that semester. After the semester ended, these cadets helped me shape survey questions that, in brief, focused on how cadets conceptualize academic writing. These cadets mentored me and helped me soar with others; I learned how to frame survey questions that might connect with cadets. Eventually, the survey was electronically administered to all 796 cadets at UNG. While the survey was running, I invited four cadets to a one-on-one interview with me. My co-researcher, who had a strong statistical background, identified themes in the survey data while I, with my qualitative background, identified themes in the interview transcripts. Our implications from this mixed methods study sought to speak to SoTL readers, those who teach academic writing, and even those who work with cadets at military schools within the US and abroad.

We placed our study in *TLI* (Rifenburg and Forester 2018). But, and here is where I commit to doing better, only two names are on that study: my co-researcher's and mine. We built a study devoted to amplifying student voice in teaching and learning (Werder and Otis 2012), but we fell short of laboring with students and developing a pedagogical partnership study that better positioned students as "co-teachers, co-inquirers, curriculum co-creators, and co-learners across all facets of the educational enterprise" (Mercer-Mapstone et al. 2017, 2).

My journey to be a hawk is a troubled one. I work in a home discipline that privileges the individual author and my academic instincts are more seagull than hawk. I work in a higher education model with a military focus and both higher education and the military have a long history of being seagull-like institutions. I know that.

But I also know that knowledge is built in community. I am in a continual process of learning with and from students through their mentorship. I am learning to soar with them.

MICHELLE'S STORY

Much of the work that I have engaged in over my career has been centered around working with Indigenous communities, most of which are remote and isolated. I have had the opportunity to teach primary school in far northern Ontario Canada in a Cree Nation and lived about 200 kilometers from the arctic circle in a Dene community in the Northwest Territories.

When I moved into the field of adult literacy and community college training, I was privileged to visit over 20 remote communities where my students lived, delivering course content and supporting their training. I was proud of this work, but I often worried about the pedagogical implications of a top-down approach to working with these communities. A fact about seagulls: they are not picky about what they eat . . . they just want more and more and never seem to be satisfied. I often felt that way about the statistics and data that we needed to collect from our projects to make our case for continued financial support from the funding agency. At times it felt like we were just picking away and collecting scraps.

In response to this, the SoTL research for my PhD thesis, and any research since, has been very much community focused. In fact, I allow myself to be led by community. In my work, I do not try to figure out what the community needs from us, but what it is that community already has and how we can build strength from understanding that truth. In this way, I am encouraged to lift up the community and its needs, raising it higher and stronger, not looking for individual glory or ongoing scraps for picking.

My higher research degree was completed in collaboration with community, as partners in the work, figuring out pathways, moving forward, together.

I was invited to collaborate with a small Indigenous community who was preparing for an anniversary celebration of their community. At the same time, residents were concerned about the imminent closure of their school due to lack of enrollment. For the celebration, the community had collected a vast number of photographs and collated stories of the past, but was unsure how to display these artifacts to a public facing audience. What ensued was a six-month project, using a foundation of social cultural theory (Vygotsky 1978) and Communities of Practice (Lave and Wenger 1991) that used Design Based Research as a vehicle to bring together photos, stories, voices, and technology that resulted in a community led presentation about the importance of the school at the center of their community's growth. While memories of education were not always positive, the school did bring people together and continues to be an important place for the community. Driven by the local focus group, I was the guide on the side, teaching how to scan photos, use synchronous technology, and create a PowerPoint. I helped to gather stories of their growth and understanding and test iterations of their presentation. The end result was a live, online presentation that the community focus group delivered synchronously to a university and government organization and then showed to the Minister for Education at the community celebration. The school continues to operate to this day.

Living in remote and isolated places makes one understand the importance of relationships with others, and the community that you are from, welcomed to, and help to create, that keeps you going. One of the most challenging aspects of this work was building trust and a relationship with the community and then trying to explain to my institution that the community and I were a team in this research. Believe me, explaining to my ethics department in 2010, that my research participants were partners in the research and that they did not want to be anonymous, they wanted to be heard, their voice loud and clear, was one of the biggest hurdles I had to overcome!

Like everyone's thesis, mine had to be examined and I received memorable feedback and thoughtful suggestions. However, it was the copy of the completed work that community Elder [name redacted] went through page by page, checking every word, marking the top of each and every piece of paper with her stamp of approval, that is more important to me than any examiner's feedback and I will treasure that copy forever.

Being a hawk is about soaring above the crowd, in some ways vulnerable, doing things differently, with wings outstretched, hanging in the wind and being patient, taking time to travel the journey, being bold and brave.

REFLECTION AND ACTION

In the keynote address at ISSOTL 2022, Kovach (2022) brought the audience into a space where we collectively considered how we share knowledge. Kovach focused on Indigenous research methodologies and anti-oppressive teacher education. Kovach's talk challenged us, and we were specifically struck by Kovach's argument that if we do not pay attention to how we share knowledge, "we run the risk of inadvertently being silencing and ultimately being assimilative." A method to address this danger is testimonial relationships. Drawing from philosopher Fricker (2007), Kovach taught us that to "give testimony is to assume someone will hear testimony." Testimonial relationships are "relationships between those who share story and those who hear story." Testimonial relationships inspire soaring together. Like Pitt and Kovach, we note the imperative to enter ethical community-led research that lifts

all involved. As we sat in the audience, we individually thought of our own projects—long completed. We noted how testimonial relationships, such as the hawk metaphor woven through this essay, attend to community and build knowledge in community. Both focus on relationships. As we continue our SoTL projects, and as readers of *TLI* continue their own SoTL projects, we offer this notion of relationships, either as soaring together or sharing and hearing stories, as central to the work we strive to do.

We conclude with two points. One point invites inward reflection; the second point invites outward action.

Reflection: Thinking of your own work and context, have you tended to engage in your research as a seagull or a hawk? Why do you think your research has been completed from this perspective? With this reflection we are inviting you to consider your own passions and the drivers behind your work and consider the elements of "hawk-ness" that you can bring to your context.

Action: Engage in your next community focused SoTL project as a hawk. With this action, we are inviting you into a community of SoTL researchers and practitioners who come out of the isolated and competitive place, where so many academics find themselves, and start thinking about the community of participants leading us in our work. The relationships that we aim to achieve in our community-led research experiences are practiced and intentional; they show up in our thoughts and actions as researchers. The ongoing demands to produce research outputs from a competitive, siloed, and often toxic environment can blur our vision of the kind of researchers that we set out to be from the moment we left our nests and entered the open sky, excited by the possibility of making change through our work. Perhaps it is time to re-evaluate.

Together, let's be hawks.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES

Michelle J. Eady is an associate professor of curriculum and pedagogy at the University of Wollongong (AUS). She is the incoming president of ISSOTL (2023–2024), an ISSOTL fellow, SFHEA, HERDSA fellow, ACEN director and sits on the International Research Group of WACE. She looks forward to meeting and collaborating with other hawks!

J. Michael Rifenburg is a professor of English at the University of North Georgia (USA). He serves as senior faculty fellow for scholarly writing with UNG's Center for Teaching, Learning, and Leadership and on the ISSOTL Convenings Committee. Like Michelle, he looks forward to soaring with other hawks.

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