Yarning about Yarning – Knowledge Mobilization in an International Decolonizing Dialogue

with Dr. Donna Baines (UBC School of Social Work) and Dr. Bindi Bennett (Federation University)

[Intro Theme Music]

Dr. Barbara Lee **0:05**

I'm Dr. Barbara Lee, the Knowledge Exchange and Mobilization Scholar for the University of British Columbia School of Social Work. This is the Knowledge Exchange: A Partnership-in-Action Podcast highlighting community-engaged partnerships within and outside the University of British Columbia School of Social Work which is situated on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territories of the Musqueam people. Dr. Donna Baines, Professor at the University of British Columbia School of Social Work, and Dr. Bindi Bennett, Professorial Research Fellow at Federation University discuss yarning, the Indigenous practice of preserving the oral cultures of storytelling. Reflecting on their international grant, Emancipatory Dialogue, with academics and non-academics across Canada, Australia and Taiwan, Dr. Baines and Dr. Bennett talk about yarning with Indigenous-led organizations in the project and the facilitation of a decolonizing dialogue between Western anti-oppressive and Indigenous approaches. Their conversation together produces learning about conducting research that respects cultural values and teachings, and emphasize the co-creation and co-ownership.

Dr. Bindi Bennett **1:19**

Yama nindayu, um, Bindi Naya, Gamilaroi Naya, um, Gaya Naya, naladuandu Jinibara. My name is Bindi, I'm a Gamilaroi First Nations person from Australia. I just acknowledge that I am on unceded sovereign lands of the Jinibara country here in Queensland. Just want to acknowledge our elders' past and present for all the work we do. And I think that's integral just in our positioning, how we introduce ourselves. We'll roll on to how we do our work, but in the Aboriginal relational way of introducing ourselves, I'm a mother, a social worker, a friend, and I'm interested in, um, de-Westernizing and dismantling all of colonial, all of the colony.

Dr. Donna Baines **2:06**

My name is Donna Baines, and I would like to acknowledge that I'm on the unceded, ancestral, traditional, and occupied lands of the Musqueam people, here in beautiful Vancouver, British Columbia. I'm also a mom, a partner, a social worker. I like to think I'm a friend even of Bindi's, which is maybe why we work well together. And also, I'm an anti-oppressive and decolonizing academic.

Dr. Bindi Bennett **2:31**

Yes, and I think that's probably why we're here to talk today because we actually do work really well together and we have – because we have quite a passion for decolonizing is one of the words around the language of tearing down the colony and putting in more Indigenous systems and as part of that we were part of a grant that went across Canada, Taiwan, and Australia, and that's where I came in, of course. Do you want to talk a little bit about that wonderful grant?

Dr. Donna Baines **3:01**
Thanks of you to characterize it as wonderful.

Dr. Bindi Bennett **3:04**
Well, I think it is.

Dr. Donna Baines **3:07**
For Canadian viewers, they'll be familiar with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and this grant was provided by that body. It includes academics and non-academics in Canada, Australia, and Taiwan, as Bindi mentioned. And it has a very lofty title which we sometimes throw around and confuse people. It's called Emancipatory Dialogue. So, the idea is that rather than seeing, decolonizing and Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and doing, which I always get in the wrong order according to Bindi. We, rather than these knowledges and practices being seen as an add-on to Western knowledge, we're trying to have a dialogue between anti-oppressive approaches and decolonizing and Indigenous approaches so that they, in some ways, they become good friends, maybe like Bindi and I, constructive friends, productive friends, but they probably still for various reasons remain separate in certain spaces and certain times. So, I'm not sure what the model is but I'm going to go with good friends at the moment approaches.

Dr. Bindi Bennett **4:19**
Yeah. And as part of that, obviously we came to Australia because we felt that there were a lot of challenges in being good friends. So, we started to interview Aboriginal-led Aboriginal organizations, First Nations organizations in Australia. We were then challenged by the First Nations people to sort of have storytelling and a non-Western way of presenting the findings. There's usually very Western ways, which we're quite comfortable with as academics, but then we decided, well, yes, that's a great challenge. Let's investigate that. And in Australia, we call it yarning. So that was what we started to do.

So yarning is really integral to Aboriginal people and their really deep connection, not just to each other, but also to country, the land that we are on, and then also other sentient beings. So, there are a couple of First Nations scholars who talk about yarning, but really from a cultural point of view, it's a way for our knowledge, our oral knowledge to flow really naturally. It's a way for us to share our experiences with each other in a very non-academic way. And it really promotes that collectiveness that most First Nations groups come from.

It's used a lot as part of healing, but it also has a real protocol to it. And if you are part of an Indigenous First Nations community in Australia, you'll often get big decisions made by yarning. And now what we've done is we've been able to preserve our oral cultures that way but we've also been able to move it into research and that's what we did here so we really used a very relational process. I'm very culturally related to the Aboriginal people we were yarning with and then we really emphasised for our ally, Donna, to be there as a real listener, a very deep listener, not just with her ears, and she can speak to this, not just with her ears. And then we also, just to get that connection going, and then we were very conscious of reciprocity, and we'll talk to that in a second.

Dr. Donna Baines **6:24**
Yeah, I think an important piece of learning for me that does not come naturally is to be humble. So, academia mostly trains us to put ourselves forward. You know, it's kind of an entrepreneurial academic that is the, seen as the successful career. And in, within yarning, it's important to hang on to, as, as Bindi said, to be somebody who's a deep listener, somebody who's listening with your heart and with your sort of whole being, as opposed to sorting out what sort of article could I write from this, or is there a conference presentation here? Which there always is, so you don't, there always is, because it's deep and rich and beautiful content that you get from yarning. So, yes, I would say humble, patient, somewhat in the background, but not in a way that people feel that you're not active, you know, so not kind of being a passive aggressive observer or something like, "oh, you're all ignoring me and talking", but being a very present, um, participant.

Dr. Bindi Bennett **7:28**
It's a very mindful process, isn't it? Like it's mindful of your own, often when we're talking to, I find when I'm talking to non-Indigenous academics, they're usually creating some kind of response in their head while I'm speaking. And it's actually not doing that. It's being very able to just be in that moment with that moment. And then the response just comes naturally, as you said. That asserts a real sense of respect, a very deep sense of respect, which is really needed in yarning, but being able to hover around as an ally around the outskirts shows a nod to sovereignty. These are the people that actually need to be given the space to speak and be and then I will come in. So you need a little bit of resilience to be able to do that. And you need to be able to hold some fragility that may come up in these tricky and difficult talks, I think.

So, yeah, so I guess when we were talking about these yarns, we were really aware of reciprocity and also of data sovereignty. So, when we made everything, we made everything with co-ownership so everything is still owned by the community or the data, but also any of the products is on their websites as well as we might utilize them in different sorts of ways and speak about them like this. We open up opportunities. So, for example, we've got a conference coming up in Taiwan and we'll bring community members to speak to it there so we're really looking at that self-determination. We're looking at ways to empower. We're looking at ways to capacity build. So, this isn't just about benefit to us as researchers, it becomes benefit to the people that we're researching with, creating partnership with.

So, it also means that we have actual, what I like to call governance, where we can actually speak to Aboriginal and First Nations peoples to say, make sure we don't misuse or misrepresent any data, and that we're not exploitative, because honestly, a lot of people who come into First Nations communities are there to exploit the data. We're certainly not doing that. So, it then leads to a lot of data around community-led solutions and I think that's where the real change comes as well from community to community. But we wouldn't have done, been able to do that if we hadn't followed some of those cultural protocols.

Dr. Donna Baines **9:48**
Yeah, and maybe just flesh out a little bit what we ended up doing in the face of this challenge of, "what are you going to do about oral tradition?" And we were, we were a little bit surprised, and

then we thought about it, and we suggested to the groups that we'd been involved with, that we maybe try doing videos.

So, we would have another yarn, and try to piece together videos that might be useful to them in their work. But also, we would use in some ways as examples of how we're trying to work in a different way so it would be sharing our research findings, but it would be more than that. It would be also process-y. So, we had a very steep learning curve to figure out how to do videos. I don't think we've nailed it, but we do have two videos. I showed them to my research class and we're still kind of working out how to do these videos, how to share these videos. But the processes that Bindi explains are underlying everything we're trying to do. And, when we make mistakes, if the videos don't come out perfect, you know, we kind of go, “well, you know, we're working on it, and what could we do better?” And, you know, feedback, feedback, feedback, please, and dialogue.

Dr. Bindi Bennett **11:01**
Yeah, I think that that too, we've certainly learned about that two-way learning philosophy, haven't we? That it's not just that we're learning about what the communities are doing and what the solutions are and how they're decolonizing or looking at colonial structures. But we're also learning about the people and the communities themselves. And we're also learning about ourselves and having to get ourselves uncomfortable in all sorts of ways. Yes, we have to learn new ways of technology, which went neither of us are particularly excited about, but it's actually, we also have to learn new ways of being sometimes with these communities and so that's how come it works. And that does require a lot of flexibility.

As a researcher that you can't – if we had said, “oh no, this is what we said we'd do in the grant and therefore, that's only what we're going to do,” we would have really lost that respect from our people we were speaking to, but also lost so many opportunities to go in different ways of doing research that are decolonial. And, I wonder too Donna, sometimes if when you're showing people a different way of being for the first time, there is a lot of that cultural shock that's occurring. Not really sure what to do with how to learn this way, never been taught how to learn orally, not been taught how to do what we call didgeridip listening. So we have to scaffold people up to decolonial work, if that makes sense. And understanding decolonial work, because this could have been the first time they've seen it and they might think it's just a chat when it's actually much deeper than that and, and much more holistic than that, but that takes a lot of time to get your head around, I think.

Dr. Donna Baines **12:48**
I think that's really true. It's not like a TikTok video. It's a very different experience. I think also I showed it to a Canadian audience, and we might have needed subtitles for the Australian accent. I'm not sure it's possible. I also really want to emphasize something you said, Bindi, about how this wasn't in the original plan for the grant, but you know, we responded to it, and we felt it was the right thing to do, and it was also because it felt like we had greater accountability and integrity if we did it this way, so even though we had to kind of scramble and go, “well, how would we respect oral tradition? But what's the best way to do that? And is a video an okay approach, or is it kind of superficial and, and not going to work?” But people said to go ahead. We also had to, which is not

something that's, I guess it's often done, but it still can be a bit awkward to repurpose your budget. So, we had a budget that said we're going to do these kinds of things, and then we had to kind of go, well, maybe I have to rethink that and re-prioritize some funds to make this work.

Dr. Bindi Bennett **13:55**
I think there's a couple of things I want to pick up on that. And that is we weren't just being ethical as researchers. We were actually showing respect to cultural values. We were actually responding to First Nations people who were saying, "this is what we want to see underpinned in the grant." And we hadn't, when we wrote the grant, obviously, we didn't know that that was they might want or wish or desire. The second thing is that it sounds really simple. Oh, we just did some videos, but we actually did up to nine hours of pre-talking before we actually then did the videos. So, the actual work in a First Nations community, it takes a lot more time. It may take nine hours to get one hour of data, nine hours of relational – we had lunch, you know, we don't rush people, we talk about what they might like to say, what their roles might be, what the most important things they want, how they want to control the data.

There's so many levels of informed consent in what we do in the pre-yarn that then influences even what we do in the yarn. And then there's the post-yarns. And we don't just abandon these communities, we are still in touch with them fairly regularly, we're talking to them different sorts of things so that it's not a fly-in, fly-out approach in any way, shape or form. We actually stay in relation and, and we also keep in mind what other opportunities we might have for those First Nations communities and we assist them. They might ask us to help them write a grant or do something so there's always this conversation of in relationship with and benefit to and from. So we're really quite active still, even though we're at the end of this grant, we're probably still quite busy with the doing to make sure that we're giving that sovereignty.

Dr. Donna Baines **15:49**
I have bad news, Bindi, we got a one-year extension, so it's not over till it's over. So, there you go. This is another point that I want to make the piggybacks on what you were saying, Bindi, about keeping on with the communities is I want to address why we don't have the folks we did the videos, why we don't have them here. Yes. I had this strong feeling that they had already given a lot to us, and to ask them to do further, what is in essence, unpaid work, you know, they have given us a lot already that it didn't feel right to me. And I'm sure in lots of context, it is right but yeah, anyway, so we kind of went back.

Dr. Bindi Bennett **16:30**
But in saying that, we're also bringing them to Taiwan where we think they're going to have much more fun. A lot more benefit to be able to come to another country and have a little bit of holiday and a little bit of work. So, I think it's about the opportunity. We did talk to them about it as well and they weren't necessarily, because they're non academics, they don't see outputs as excitingly as we do. So, they have to see benefit to it as well. We will always nod to their cultural and intellectual properties, and we will always give them sovereignty and we will always have those conversations, but no, they're not as interested in the academic-y outputs as possibly we are, but they also, we will still tell them what happened. We will still debrief. We will show them. I've

already gone to them about what I might talk about so they're aware, all those kinds of things. We're not necessarily cutting them out. We're still involving them, but they have the right to also say, “yeah, nah, we're not as interested, but thanks”.

Dr. Donna Baines **17:27**
I also just want to have just a quick moment to talk about terms because we're talking about two different contexts here, Australia and Canada. In Canada, the term First Nations is used differently than in Australia, and I would imagine we'll have quite a few Canadian viewers for this podcast. So in Canada, it reflects the reality of the Indian Act and other pieces of legislation in Canada that defines who gets to be Indigenous and whose First Nations and they're kind of different, or they are different.

Dr. Bindi Bennett **18:01**
In Australia, we have no good term. They're all colonized terms. My term is Gamilaroi, that's who I am actually, but they will not acknowledge over 250 diverse countries in Australia. We're not even in the constitution. You may have been aware of that little debacle. So, we can't even change the date of genocide and parting on genocide. So, we have Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander, which nobody likes. We have Indigenous, which nobody likes, and we have First Nations peoples, which nobody likes. So, choose your poison, really.

There's no term I can utilize except Gamilaroi that's acceptable, really, to me. And most of the, you know, Indigenous, First Nations, Aboriginal Torres Strait Islander have the same problem with the terminology. But the government gave us some nice terminology and so we utilise it to an extent because that we have to, because it isn't, but here we are. So you can see sometimes in the readings now and some of the literature coming out, people will actually be able to identify their country and their nation and where they come from and it's considered very respectful but certainly it's difficult to go through 250 of them in every meeting so it's easier to just go with First Nations or Indigenous or whatever you want to go with but none of them are really seen as positive in Australia.

Dr. Donna Baines **19:20**
It's a complicated colonized ground, for sure. So, Bindi, where do you think we'll go next with knowledge mobilization?

Dr. Bindi Bennett **19:28**
I mean, I think it's a really interesting conversation in terms of how we continue to de-Westernize. I would really like to be looking more at the collective and how we create collective across nations, Australia, Canada, Taiwan, but also across each of those countries. I'm very interested in that, but I'm also really interested in some of the ways that the First Nations people have been telling us they've been dealing with this forever. Doesn't matter which government's in. They're all as bad as each other, but they have actually got a little framework and a map for how they have done some of that and I think some more conversation about how we strengthen those frameworks would be really interesting to me. Have you got any ideas?

Dr. Donna Baines **20:18**
I never have ideas. I just, something drops in my lap and I go, “Oh, I should do that”.

Dr. Bindi Bennett **20:26**
Well, I'm pretty sure that we've also been told a little bit about further work and what people want to have happen. And I think the conference this year will be another opportunity for people to. I think particularly Taiwan is quite thirsty and interested in being able to speak to other First Nations, Indigenous countries because they really are in a very interesting position of how having to get sovereignty and how to get sovereignty. So, I think it's really interesting how we can capacity build other First Nations groups that aren't doing as well as others, and not that anybody's doing that fantastically either, and how we then create thriving for First Nations Indigenous peoples worldwide, I think is a really big conversation.

For me, moving from sometimes we spend a fair bit of time talking about the deficit of having to fight the colony, moving more into a, "hey, we've actually been doing this for a really long time". Well, how do we continue to get even better and thrive with it? And we've talked a little bit about that in our team, where there are some First Nations people who talk about it. You know, don't want to even think about hope, but there are a whole lot of First Nations people who are saying, "actually, we're very resilient, we are very hopeful, we are very flexible, we want to thrive into that and grow into that". There's a whole lot of literature on Indigenous thriving if you're interested in that concept to start to think about it as well.

Dr. Donna Baines **21:51**
I love that. I love those ideas. It's true. We do have ideas, don't we?

Dr. Bindi Bennett **21:55**
I think there's an argument for having a little bit of healthy cynicism and robust conversations around the actual challenges to anything because of the colony. But I think that if you get stuck in that, it's going to give you, in my opinion, it's going to give you some physical, maybe spiritual ill health. I think there's got to be a point where you say, “yes, there's going to always be difficulties and we're not going to get a lot of wins all the time”, but, but the wins we do get, for example, I'm thinking in Australia, Mabo, you know, where we got some native title, took a long time, but we got there, but some of the wins we get, they're of such benefit that they're worth fighting for and they're worth having hope in and they're worth investing in. I thought, well, that's maybe the social worker in me, but otherwise, why would we bother?

Dr. Donna Baines **22:47**
Right. Yeah. And to cite Rowena, she spoke about this concept of Black joy, which, in Australia, again, for Canadian folks, Indigenous people were often referred to as Blackfellas and like other oppressed communities, they took that title and, and gave it power for themselves and meaning for themselves. So, Black Joy is somewhat akin to thrivance, like the idea that there is a lot of joy in these communities, there's a lot of strength, it's not just centuries of oppression, but it's also centuries of resilience, resistance, and all kinds of bright and wonderful people doing bright and wonderful things, so I love that.

Dr. Bindi Bennett **23:26**
And I think that some of the work now is being able to go to those communities and highlight that and create frameworks for that so that others can replicate that. And where, where can we find the benefits and where can we highlight them and where can we double them? Yeah. And that's certainly the work I'm really interested in. We went fairly urban in Australia, I can't speak to other places, but in Australia, we went fairly urban, and I'm really interested to take similar conversations, a little bit more regional and remote and see what that might bring as well.

So unfortunately I have a list Donna, you did ask. But there's always work to do and I think that's unfortunately because of the racism and the nature of the world at the moment where it is a bit of a worry, I think, the way that the world is going, to be fighting against neoliberalist and colonial structures is actually a difficult task and not everybody is going to be able to have the power and privilege to be able to do that because your very life is on the line. And so that's something we've spoken to quite a lot, isn't it? We've got these little titles now and possible pockets and bubbles of safety where we can actually do some of that work and shake the system a little bit without the same repercussions as perhaps an early career researcher or, you know, a young researcher might have or a diverse intersectional researcher you might have, if that makes sense.

Dr. Donna Baines **24:59**
Yeah, good. We will carry the mantle forward.

Dr. Bindi Bennett **25:02**
I mean, I think it goes back to our whole set of values and our whole set of integrity and our whole way of being as a social work academic. You know, I came to academia after 20 odd years of being a social worker in the field. So, I came with this whole, I guess idea that the world needs to move and change and academia perhaps goes a little slower than it should. So, it's that kind of personal professional integrity, I think that drives the work. Well, I think the last thought is it's all very well for us to have ideas, but actually it's the community-led solutions that we're more interested in. And so, at the end of the day, when we do have our extra year and we do sit with our communities, they'll be telling us what they want.

I think the conference is a real space for them to take that sovereignty and governance and make a list for us as well so I do believe that even though Dawn and I speak a lot about the work that gives us a lot of joy and passion, we're also very aware that we will need to change direction. And that's been a real lesson in this grant is like we have pivoted a lot and, and it's been, it's had its challenges, but it's also had great, I think, rewarding in terms of for us and growing us as researchers, but also for the data. We did some data we would never have gotten had we not taken the risk and put ourselves out there and gone, well, we're a little bit uncomfortable, but let's just lean on into it and do it anyway. And that's really what we did, which was, and here we are.

Dr. Donna Baines **26:40**
Here we are. And we were even in Taiwan.

Dr. Bindi Bennett **26:42**
Yeah, I think the Taiwan was such a privilege and such a gift because we had so many First Nations people sharing their stories and their struggles, but also their wins with us and seeing the work that they're doing to challenge the colony at grave risk to themselves is quite inspiring. So, we were very, very, very gifted and lucky that they're as interested in learning from other First Nations communities as we were to be with them. Um, quite, quite the gift. And we get to go back, which is another gift. And I think we're very aware of that when we go and how we make sure we have benefit there and bring benefit to them.

Dr. Donna Baines **27:22**
Yep, yep, they invited us back.

Dr. Bindi Bennett **27:27**
Well, I mean, and I just would like to say to non-Indigenous people, they, you know, invite seems such a word of choice, but actually with First Nations people, sometimes when they say come back, it's not an invitation, it's actually a conversation to stay in reciprocity, to stay in respect, to stay in a situation where you really actually promoting collectiveness. Sometimes you have to actually be there physically. Not everything can be done on Teams or on phones, etc. So, come here doesn't just mean if you want, come here means let's continue this deep conversation. Let's continue this relationship.

It's a gift but it also comes with accountability and responsibility. So as a researcher you need to understand that you can't just go in and get your data and then never go again. It's not going to work like that. And that's the conversation, isn't it? That First Nations people don't always need or want to be, you know, doing their business inside in a very colonized space. They want to take you to country. They want to tell you the stories. They want to walk you the, however long it took to get to the waterfall. What a beautiful, amazing thing but also, it's all the balance of reciprocity and also, you know, respect. And of course, when you're invited, you do it.

[Outro Theme Music]

Dr. Barbara Lee **28:49**
Thanks for listening to The Knowledge Exchange: A Partnership-in-Action Podcast! This podcast is a University of British Columbia Knowledge Exchange and Mobilization Scholars initiative funded by the UBC Office of the Vice-President Research and Innovation's Knowledge Exchange unit. I'm Dr. Barbara Lee, the Knowledge Exchange and Mobilization Scholar for the School of Social Work, podcast host, and executive producer. Michelle O'Kane is the podcast producer. Cathy Jiu, Qian Zhou and Maddie Cathcart are our producers and editors. Podcast cover was designed by Cathy Jiu. Podcast music is open source, called Motivational Day, Audio Coffee by Denis Kyshchuk. Thanks for listening!