

Academic Citations Evolve to Include Indigenous Oral Teachings

One tenet of scientific publishing is the use of academic citations—nods to what's known or has been done before. But referencing something other than a traditional written source can feel superficial: A “personal communication” citation, for example, typically doesn't show up in a reference list. Now, a librarian has spearheaded an effort to develop more thorough citation templates for the oral teachings often shared by members of Indigenous communities.

Written sources are definitely the norm when it comes to academic citations, said Lisa White, a paleontologist at the University of California, Berkeley and chair of AGU's Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee. But there's a need to be more inclusive, she said, and to recognize that a lot of knowledge, particularly that associated with Indigenous communities, is not recorded in written form. “There's a real rich history that a lot of Indigenous scholars bring.”

“Limitations in the Academic System”

Lorisa MacLeod, learning services librarian at Alberta Library in Edmonton, Alta., Canada, first realized there was a need for better citation tools for oral communication while studying anthropology as an undergraduate.

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Several of her professors repeatedly emphasized how difficult it was to properly acknowledge in their research the unrecorded oral teachings of Indigenous communities. They “drilled home the point that there were limitations in the academic system,” MacLeod said.

For instance, personal communications typically don't appear in reference lists, said MacLeod. That's a significant drawback when scholars are taught to peruse reference lists to learn more about a subject, she said. “A personal communication that's not included



in that list is just automatically not even recognized.”

After earning a master's degree in library and information science, MacLeod, a member of the James Smith Cree Nation, started thinking that she could make a difference. “At a lot of institutions, the role of teaching citations tends to fall heavily on the librarians,” she said. “It makes a lot of sense that there [should] be librarians taking a very active role in the future of citations.”

Going Beyond Personal Communication

In 2018, MacLeod began developing citation templates for oral teachings. She relied on input from people associated with the Indigenous Student Centre at NorQuest College in Edmonton, where she was working at the time. The goal was to create templates that went beyond the abbreviated personal communication citation that was, at the time, the de facto way of referencing an oral source, said MacLeod. “There's a lot of information in these templates that doesn't exist in the original ‘personal communication’ version. It really allows us to be able to name our people in conjunction with their stories and the knowledge they were stewards of.”

The templates, which are available online (bit.ly/templates-online), have options to include the name of the person being cited, their nation or community, where they live, and the subject of the communication, among other information. They're available for both American Psychological Association (APA) and

Modern Language Association (MLA) citation styles, and MacLeod is committed to supporting people who wish to adapt the templates to other styles as well. These templates are currently in use by roughly 25 colleges and universities across Canada and the United States.

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This work is important because most people in Western societies grow up receiving a Western education, said Nancy C. Maryboy (Cherokee/Navajo), president and executive director of the Indigenous Education Institute in Friday Harbor, Wash. “Very few people know what Indigenous science is.” These templates give scholars the opportunity to present and acknowledge Indigenous ways of knowing, she said. “It's a way of leveling the playing ground to bring more awareness to Indigenous science.”

By **Katherine Kornei** (@KatherineKornei), Science Writer