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From the Light of Rainbows: Growing the Spiralic Garden of Community-Based Inquiry and Co-Learning

Ananda Marin

A teaching I have received from observing my father is to ask, “What’s good?,” when we encounter someone during our day. This greeting is different from asking, “How are you doing?” I must admit that asking, “What’s good?,” does not always come easy to me. I often find myself in spaces where asking, “How are you doing?,” is perfunctory. In these exchanges, which often occur during the in-between moments of larger activities—in the hallway between classes, at the start of a meeting, in passing on a forest trail—little wait time is given for response. One might even hope that the response is, “Fine, thanks,” or, “I’m great,” so that everyone can move on to what is thought of as the “meat” of the conversation. From my perspective, asking, “What’s good?,” shifts the grounds of an interaction. This question invites the person in front of you to potentially enter a shared space of abundance, to reflect on the beauty of the world in which they travel and to co-create a shared moment of joy. This is not to say that the question, “How are you doing?,” should be avoided. Both questions can be asked from a place of care and love. For me, the difference is about from where we start telling the story we have been experiencing and living so far. “What’s good?” can, at times, provide an opening to live among the immense brilliance, capability, and beauty that we each bring to the world. In the day to day, I find myself routinely asking, “How are you doing?,” and maybe this speaks to the way that I/we are disciplined to experience time in formal education settings.

[The guest editors arranged the essays to be read progressively. We suggest that readers first read the introduction and then approach these essays in their order. —Ed.]

ANANDA MARIN is an associate professor at the University of California, Los Angeles. She uses qualitative and video-ethnographic methods and participatory design research to explore questions about the cultural nature of human cognition and development. A primary goal of her work is to broaden conceptualizations of learning and teaching in the communities she partners with.

In my work with the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative (IELC)¹, I am continually cultivating a practice where I ask, “What’s good?” This is akin to the process of “searching for goodness,” a process embedded within the methodology of portraiture and one that was introduced to me by Dr. Tarajeau Yazzie-Mintz, the current director of the IELC.² And so perhaps it is fitting that the question, “What’s good?,” leads my own practice as I learn alongside the IELC.

The IELC is a national center that brings together teams of practitioners from multiple sites who have committed time to engage in Community-Based Inquiry for the purposes of strengthening systems, partnerships and practices within Indigenous early childhood education. There are currently four collaborative partners, Wiikwedong ECD Collaborative, Wicoie Nandagikendan, Daybreak Star, and Keiki Steps. For these collaborating sites, the IELC is an intellectual home that offers resources to engage in Indigenous research and knowledge generation.

A core premise of the IELC is that strong Indigenous early childhood education systems can be developed through engagement in Community-Based Inquiry projects.³ This premise is grounded in the belief that “Native communities have the ability to *identify* areas of need and challenge, and to *implement* community-based solutions for obstacles to success.”⁴ Within this larger context, the IELC creates conditions for equitable partnerships with Native communities. These partnerships are organized around participation in multiple cycles of inquiry with the aim of generating knowledge for community-based solutions within the field of early childhood education. IELC partners have access to multiple resources including cost-free inquiry support.

The IELC operates from a theory of change that is organized around the following conjecture: Indigenous early learning systems can increase and expand culturally grounded, high-quality learning opportunities for children and families by engaging in equitable partnerships that support participation in cycles of locally driven Community-Based Inquiry where local change solutions are envisioned, designed, implemented, and reflected upon. Sites’ processes for Community-Based Inquiry were iterative and included cycles of visioning, designing, implementing, and reflecting. The cycles both flow outward and return inward, generating spirals of activity that create opportunities for expansive growth. Engagement across these cycles were supported through continuous participation in both team-based Reflective Inquiry Sessions and collaborative-wide Community Inquiry Sessions. These sessions, facilitated by Dr. Tarajeau Yazzie-Mintz and Mr. Joelfre Grant, connected sites around questions relevant to their practice, creating a constellation of activities that had ripple effects within and across communities. For close to two years, I worked alongside the IELC in an evaluation capacity. I had the opportunity to observe these sessions and I also participated in Reflective Co-Learning Sessions. Through these experiences, I crafted two evaluation (i.e., co-learning) reports with the intent of supporting the IELC’s vision.

In this article, I reflect on Community-Based Inquiry, the IELC evaluation process, and my experiences as the IELC evaluator. I narrate how and why we came to (re)name my role to that of co-learner and the processes we were collectively engaging in as co-learning. The reflections offered in this essay represent my current understanding of the stories I have received and what I have learned working alongside IELC partners in this role.

IT STARTS WITH RELATIONSHIPS

Before moving forward, I return to a beginning. I am trained as a learning scientist. Drawing on multiple methodologies, I have asked questions about the cultural nature of cognitive processes, like attention and observation, that facilitate learning. I have also asked questions about the relationship between identity and STEM learning. I have engaged participatory methods to collaboratively design outdoor, place-based teaching/learning contexts and lands/waters-based pedagogies.⁵ This work has been complemented by my use of video-ethnographic methods to explore how parents and children organize resources in the moment-to-moment of interaction in order to collaboratively build knowledge. My research is situated in communities that I am a part of and/or contribute to including multiracial and multiracial, urban Indigenous communities and communities of educators and artists. In my research process, I bring theories from the learning sciences alongside Indigenous learning theories in order to generate knowledge that hopefully can be put to use and facilitate wellbeing.⁶

My dissertation research explored how parents and children coordinated attention and observation while on the move (i.e., walking) in order to build relationships with each other and the natural world.⁷ Dr. Yazzie-Mintz was a member of my dissertation committee and played a vital role in helping me to see how my research contributed to both the learning sciences and early childhood education. Through this process Dr. Yazzie-Mintz came to better know me and my research. I believe it was because of these experiences that she first invited me to partner with her in an evaluation capacity a little over ten years ago. Both then and now, Dr. Yazzie-Mintz has asked me to bring the lens that I use as a researcher to engage in a meaningful reflective practice that can support the forward momentum of the work she is doing alongside early childhood education (ECE) practitioners. It was an honor to be asked to work alongside her ten years ago and it is an honor now. While a good majority of my time as an educator is spent in higher education contexts with college students, my collaboration with Tarajeau continues to serve as an important reminder that, when done best, teaching and learning is a community-based, intergenerational activity that brings research, theory, and practice together for the purposes of activating change and putting in motion the futures that we desire for ourselves and our kin.

MY ROLE WITHIN THE INDIGENOUS EARLY LEARNING COLLABORATIVE

In March 2021, I received an email from Dr. Yazzie-Mintz inviting me to collaborate on the IELC project.

Re: Inquiry on availability to serve as an evaluator of a new project

March 22, 2021 at 9:30 AM

Dear Ananda,

I am hoping my note finds you doing very well. We are hunkered down here in Denver and enjoying the spring snow storms blowing through the city.

I am writing to inquire of your availability and interest to serve as an evaluator for a new project I am directing. The project is just launching and we are seeking an evaluation that supports our work to document the process of cycles of Community-Based Inquiry with four tribal/Native community projects.

I'd love to talk with you -- to determine interest and availability and to answer any questions you might have.

I hope you are doing well, and look forward to reconnecting.

Tarajeau

Tarajeau Yazzie-Mintz, EdD, Founder and Principal Consultant

First Light Education Project

/Starting with What Works/

March 22, 2021 at 6:43 PM

Dear Tarajeau,

It's so nice to hear from you. I'd love to talk with you about your new projects. Would you have time this Thursday? I am free at 9:30am PST and 1:00pm PST. Looking forward to reconnecting.

Warm regards,

Ananda

Ananda M. Marin, PhD

Assistant Professor, Social Research Methodology

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It was this exchange that led to my participation as an evaluator and co-learner with the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative (IELC).

FROM EVALUATOR TO CO-LEARNER

My role within the IELC was not originally named that of co-learner. Initially, I was invited to participate as an evaluator. Many evaluators engage in the process of valuing.⁸ For example, evaluators might ask questions about which programmatic activities produce change as well as the overall value or worth of a program. Alternatively, evaluators might elevate the protocols, goals, and agency of partner sites, ultimately asking what communities value.⁹ It was shortly after being invited to serve in the role of evaluator with the Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative that expectations around how I would participate shifted. With this shift came a new name—co-learner. The name co-learner

influences perceptions about the undertaking and what is at stake. The prefix “co-” is defined by the Merriam-Webster dictionary as “with : together : joint : jointly” and as “one that is associated in an action with another : fellow : partner.”¹⁰ The word “learn” is defined as: “to gain knowledge or understanding of or skill in by study, instruction, or experience,” “to come to be able,” “to come to realize.”¹¹ Putting these definitions in relation, we might define co-learning as a mutual process of reflection and knowledge generation or as the act of coming together or partnering in order to story the knowledge building process.

As Tewa scholar Gregory Cajete notes, names “may be felt to influence the things or beings that they name.”¹² I felt this new name influencing how I went about being in the space of the IELC. As a co-learner I listened for stories that communicated the values of each partner site and how these values shaped their inquiry and implementation processes. In addition, as a person witnessing the work of the IELC, I also reflected on and asked questions about my own values. These twin processes involved asking, “What is good?”, and listening for when partner sites expressed joy, frustration, pride, curiosity, uncertainty, possibilities for abundance, and more. My ability to meaningfully contribute to the collective journey of learning and knowledge generation was directly tied to how I listened for and to stories shared by early childhood education practitioners.

Dreams to Practice
Recovery
Healing
Revitalizing and Reclaiming Language and Culture
Re-Indigenizing – Resurgence
Beginning from Cultural Foundations
Sustainability

These words capture the multiple hopes that members of the IELC bring to their engagement with Community-Based Inquiry and their desire to activate change within their communities of practice. By listening to the stories that were shared over time, I came to understand these words as representing the power of Community-Based Inquiry and the collective hopes of the IELC.

CO-LEARNING AS AN EVOLVING PROCESS

Early on in my conversations with Dr. Yazzie-Mintz and Mr. Grant, it was established that the Year 1 co-learning report would focus on the process of Community-Based Inquiry. Respect for the partner sites’ time was a priority given all that they do as early childhood education practitioners working with families in order to create systems of care and learning in order to support the ongoing development of young children. Given this, it was decided that conversations between Dr. Yazzie-Mintz, Mr. Grant, and me (i.e., reflective co-learning sessions) would be the primary source of information for Year 1 from which I would generate data stories. During these sessions, Tarajeau and Joelfre shared information about the work that the sites were engaging in to both form an identity for their inquiries and to take steps toward implementing high-quality Indigenous early childhood education. With each conversation, we began to see how our evaluation, or co-learning process, was one of story sharing and storytelling. This

process is akin to what Dr. Jo-Ann Archibald writes about as “storywork.”¹³ From my readings of Dr. Archibald’s work, the writings of other Indigenous scholars (e.g., Gregory Cajete, Shawn Wilson, Margaret Kovach), and my experiences working with intertribal, urban Indian communities, I have come to understand storywork as involving twin activities—storytelling and “storylistening.”¹⁴

In the context of the IELC, sites shared the stories of their process with Tarajeau and Joelfre during their monthly Reflective Inquiry Sessions. In these sessions, Tarajeau and Joelfre took on the role of storylisteners. This role involved listening, wondering, asking questions that probe for meaning making, reflecting back and lifting up messages and teachings that have been heard, and asking questions that generate opportunities for shared meaning making. Then, Tarajeau and Joelfre would make meaning of these stories and share their understanding of the work that sites were carrying out with me during our Reflective Inquiry Sessions. In these sessions Tarajeau and Joelfre took on the role of storyteller and I took on the role of storylistener. As we continued to engage in reflective evaluation sessions, we began to develop a language for the methods and practices we were creating. For example, in one of our co-learning sessions, Tarajeau clearly articulated how my role as a co-learner was connected to seeing and telling the stories of Community-Based Inquiry:

I think the main piece I really want to see in the story is, from your perspective, as you’ve been watching this journey and it’s unfolding, what does that look like? What’s that story? And then there’s certainly themes that we’ve been trying to pay attention to that are embedded in our questions, the evaluation questions. And, so how you tell that story back to us about *mainly the process*, because, I don’t know if this is true for you Joelfre, but for me, there is a lot of work that gets done, the thinking, the engagement with the sites. It is very intuitive, but it’s also like, you’ve seen it before, you recognize what’s happening and then you carefully steer by the kinds of questions you ask a group. And what I mean by steer, it’s not that I’m trying to get them to do or go a certain direction, but it’s more of a process.

It’s about helping them figure out what’s the next step. There could be two or three, and I don’t know what the right one is for them at the time, but we keep asking what’s the right step for you at this time, where you want to take this right now. And *help them feel that* decision making process, it’s so critical. When do they get there? So, to me, I think it feels intuitive, but there’s some recognizable patterns that we’re paying attention to as we’re moving with them. And for me, sometimes that’s hard to capture.

And then sometimes you need a storyteller out there who helps us articulate . . . what’s happened over the past year. Four sites have gone through pretty much a full cycle and an inquiry. But it’s not, again, it’s not a full picture of a full round or they’re finding out things and it’s an iterative process that they keep coming around to.¹⁵

The conceptualization Tarajeau shared was tied to a larger goal that we continued to circle around across our many conversations—how do we create different ways to capture and describe the work of the IELC and Community-Based Inquiry? To this point, the

interrelated components of the co-learning process as described by Tarajeau also represent our emerging understanding of the role of co-learner as that of a storylistener and a storyteller. Being in the role of a storylistener is much like being an observant/worthy witness—you are invited into community to hear, feel, and reflect on community members' stories. Being in the role of storyteller requires a kind of collaborative contemplation that allows for a story to emerge and be told. One of the ways that I took on this responsibility was by embracing the stance of wonderment during our Reflective Inquiry Sessions. For example, during the co-learning sessions, Tarajeau and Joelfre would share multiple stories from their conversations with the IELC. I listened, reflected, and then offered questions for us to continue reflecting on together. These questions were often posed from the place of wonderment (e.g., "I started to wonder," "I keep wondering," "One of the things I'm wondering about is"). In addition, I often drew on my "cultural intuition" as I made decisions about when and how to pose questions. Delores Delgado Bernal, working with Chicana feminist epistemologies, defined cultural intuition as a multifaceted process and viewpoint that "draws from personal experience, collective experience, professional experience, communal memory, existing literature, and the research process itself".¹⁶ Descriptions of cultural intuition have expanded over the years to include spiritual, place-based, and embodied processes.¹⁷ I dynamically drew on my own personal experiences working in Indigenous education settings and history working with Tarajeau as I wondered about the sites' experiences with Community-Based Inquiry. Along the way, I embodied multiple ways of being and knowing including observant witness, storylistener, question-asker, wonderer, and storyteller. These processes provided grounding for making connections across shared stories.

METAPHOR AS A WAY OF STORYING THE PROCESS OF COMMUNITY-BASED INQUIRY AND CO-LEARNING

As I continued to be in conversation with Tarajeau and Joelfre, I was also learning how to articulate the process that I was witnessing. Metaphors and imagery played an important role in my own learning process and our collective learning process. For example, in a co-learning session on September 22, 2022, Tarajeau shared the following:

You're giving us a reflection. Again, I think you want to keep in your mind that you are in a process of co-learning in a way to confirm, to reflect, to mirror. You're not trying to establish, you know, any kind of evidence around this work. You, you really are just trying to be an additional eye and listening ear, and witnessing of what this is, and then to add your understanding of maybe the larger landscape of what's out there, just to help frame it some, but you know, think of this experience that you are going to have with the sites. Again, we reframed it as co-learning; it's not evaluation. You're trying to make sure that you understand what it is that they say they're doing. And there might be certain parts of what you haven't been able to witness, that you want to understand better about a site that you'll hone in on those questions. Because when you present this report, the big questions for me are: What's the overarching metaphors that have emerged out of this? What's unique about this work? And then where are they taking it? What's the big possibility here?¹⁸

This exchange, and others like them, opened space for me to creatively approach our joint work and aligns with Indigenous methodologies.¹⁹

BUILDING WITH THE METAPHOR OF STORY SPIRALS AND GARDENS TO DESCRIBE COMMUNITY-BASED INQUIRY

When writing the Year 1 Co-Learning Report, I drew on the metaphors of story spirals to articulate the process of Community-Based Inquiry.²⁰ Guided by conversations with Tarajeau and Joelfre, I also drew on the metaphor of a garden. Story spirals provided a form and concept to think with, one that captured the cyclical, iterative, and recursive nature of Community-Based Inquiry. Here I am referring to the stories shared across Reflective Inquiry Sessions, Community Inquiry Sessions, and Co-Learning Sessions. In the Year 1 Co-Learning Report I provided the following explanations for my decision to use spiral metaphors:

I intentionally use the word “spiral” to indicate a cycle of growth and to signal that the stories may have a shared center point or may have evolved from the emergence of new center points as the work expands and grows.²¹

Sites’ processes for Community-Based Inquiry are iterative and include cycles of visioning, designing, implementing, and reflecting. Again, the metaphor of a spiral is useful. Building with the image of seashell spirals, we can envision how cycles of inquiry create opportunities for expansive growth.²²

The following figure accompanied these images.

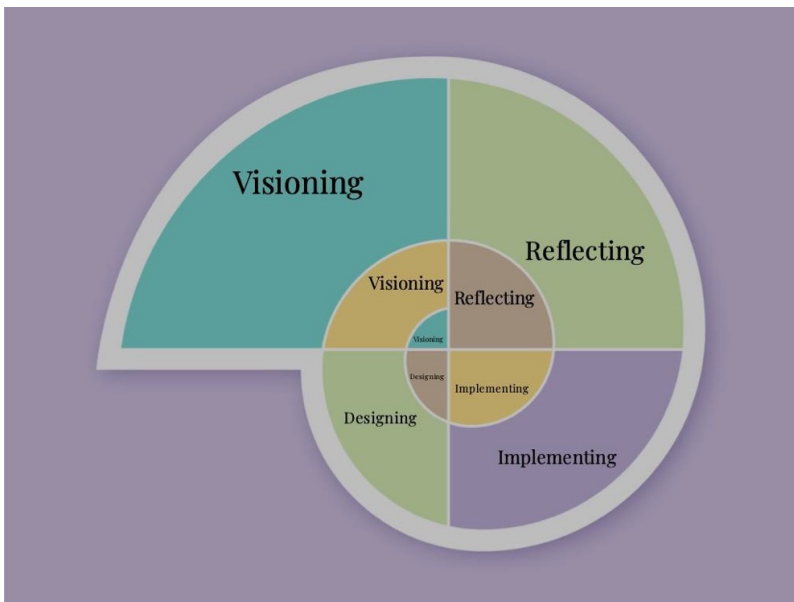


Fig. 1. Representation of the IELC Cycles of Community-Based Inquiry. The image was created by Ananda Marin with Adobe Stock.

The metaphor of a garden was also drawn on to explain aspects of Community-Based Inquiry. This metaphor was brought up more than once in conversations about the IELC and in this way can also be thought of as a story spiral. More specifically, the garden was helpful in providing an image of a place that is cultivated through relational processes of care and nourishment. In the Year 1 report, I discussed the garden metaphor in this way:

There are a number of metaphors that can be used to vividly create a picture of creating conditions for partnership and Community-Based Inquiry including the metaphor of gardening. From this perspective, a bountiful or abundant ECE garden (i.e., equitable) requires preparing the soil (i.e., visioning and listening) and planting seeds in a way (i.e. with Indigenous methods) that facilitates thriving (culture- and language-rich systems for expanded systems for healthy start and increased quality of learning opportunities). The garden metaphor was used by Dr. Yazzie-Mintz during one of our summer [Co-Learning] Sessions. During this session, Dr. Yazzie-Mintz described the IELC as being in a phase of “creating the soil.” As Dr. Yazzie-Mintz noted, the IELC is “not in a place where we’re going to see the buds just yet” (August 25, 2021, 17-18).²³

This metaphor proved to be particularly powerful and served as a place to think from when I was working on the Year 2 Co-Learning Report.

FROM STORY SPIRALS AND GARDENS TO RAINBOWS

For the Year 2 Co-Learning Report, I extended the metaphor of a garden to include a rainbow. I used these metaphors to reflect what I was wondering about and learning from the practice of storylistening. My use of these metaphors was not directly linked to my own individual thoughts, acts, or creative processes. Rather, the process involved iteratively listening to the words, ideas, and stories that were spoken by IELC partners across conversations and over time. Importantly, my methodological process for engaging in co-learning also evolved. In Year 2, I actively looked for story spirals that were connected to and/or built from the garden metaphor that was circulating in our conversations. Drawing on processes of cultural intuition, I extended the garden metaphor to include rainbows. For example, in the Year 2 Co-Learning Report I shared the following:

As noted in the Year 1 co-learning report, Dr. Yazzie-Mintz used the garden metaphor during one of our reflective co-learning sessions. In this particular session, she described the activities of Year 1 as being akin to “creating the soil” (August 25, 2021). Building with this shared teaching, I linked specific concepts and processes to the IELC garden including, abundance, equity, visioning, listening, thriving, and culture- and language-rich systems . . .²⁴

Building from the Year 1 co-learning process, I again draw on and extend the metaphor of the garden. In Year 1, we witnessed how conditions were cultivated for planting seeds for culture- and language-rich systems that increase the quality

of learning opportunities. This included preparing for readiness, creating equitable partnerships, and generating knowledge of Community-Based Inquiry. In Year 2, we witnessed how the circles of inquiry are generating rain and new cycles of growth. This growth is brought on by the concentration of energy in forming a community of practice that collectively engages in inquiry and is then reflected back in the form of a rainbow. The rainbow, a reflection of this energy, represents each circle of inquiry (i.e., spectrum). This reflection in turn, strengthens the knowledge generation process. In other words, the seeds that the IELC planted in Year 1, are now flourishing, as the circles and cycles of energy loop back into themselves.²⁵

Working from this metaphor, I then sketched out a figure to further represent and better understand the process.



FIG. 2. Representation of the IELC circles and cycles of inquiry. Originally published in *Activating Change in Indigenous Early Learning Systems: Community-based Inquiry and Strengthening Systems of Teaching and Learning for Children, Families, and Educators: A Co-Learning Report*. Indigenous Early Learning Collaborative at the Brazelton Touchpoints Center: Boston, MA. Image by Ananda Marin.

In this figure, the spectrums of the rainbow represent a circle of inquiry. The garden grows by receiving energy from each spectrum of the rainbow. This process benefits individual IELC partner sites as well as the broader IELC community. “In addition, the metaphor of the rainbow illustrates a key teaching—that everybody plays a role in generating knowledge.”²⁶

In the Year 2 Co-Learning Report, I included a note on methods, which provided further explanation as to why I used the metaphor of a rainbow:

The metaphor of the rainbow is also useful for understanding the co-learning process. Rainbows are full circles; however, given our position on the ground we only see part of the rainbow. This is very much like the co-learning process. As Dr. Yazzie-Mintz

described, there is a line or membrane between the processes of Community-Based Inquiry and the knowledge that is generated. Knowledge rests with the community of practice and they are the ones who decide what gets shared and how it is shared. Furthermore, as a co-learner only certain aspects of the circles of inquiry are directly visible to me. Unlike more traditional research and evaluation approaches, I do not visit sites to directly observe the work they are doing. What I have the privilege of witnessing are the reflective inquiry sessions, the collective inquiry sessions, and public sharing sessions. In addition, I am rarely in the role of “interviewer” or “focus group leader.” Instead, I participate in co-learning sessions with the IELC leadership team and the sites. In these co-learning sessions I offer my reflections on what I have witnessed, pose questions, and at times make connections. My primary role is to be a storyteller and to generate reflective questions for my own process of witnessing and the process of reflecting with the IELC leadership team.²⁷

CLOSING REFLECTIONS: LISTENING FOR AND HEARING GOODNESS IN IELC STORIES

From my perspective, my role and positioning within the IELC puts Robin Kimmerer’s ideas about a gift economy into practice within a co-learning context.²⁸ In the process of gift exchange, I was offered the incredible gift of learning alongside IELC partners as they generated knowledge about Indigenous early childhood education. In return, I gifted back to the IELC metaphors that storied their processes for Community-Based Inquiry. As a co-learner, I felt a responsibility to share stories that could be “put to good use and support the sustenance of knowledge generation.”²⁹ One of the ways I did this was by listening for, hearing, and reflecting back “what’s good.” As I engaged in this process, I actively worked to remember that “it is not my right to have knowledge of IELC partner sites’ processes; rather, as an invited guest, it is my privilege and responsibility to ethically walk alongside the IELC on their inquiry journeys.”³⁰ This stance embodies what it means to be a co-learner.

As mentioned, the process of gift exchange is directly linked to listening for and hearing “what’s good.” When engaging in the practice of listening for “what’s good,” I heard seven practices (i.e., teachings) that the IELC partner sites continually spoke to when reflecting on what sustained their engagement with Community-Based Inquiry as well as what grew their inquiries.

- + Being a good host and guest
- + Self and communal care
- + Seasonal time
- + Connecting with lands and waters and more-than-human kin
- + Speaking and thinking with Indigenous languages
- + Recognizing the flow of relationships and building from there
- + Ceremony

When gathering, whether online or in person, members of the IELC routinely took steps to be a good host and/or guest. This included the ways in which partners showed up when gathering: including ways of greeting one another, providing hospitality, and

NOTES

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