

For Art's Sake, For Health's Sake: Centering Creativity in Indigenous Health Research Knowledge Sharing

Jenny R. Rand* ¹, Keyara Valencia-Hinds ², Tara Pride ³, Marni Amirault¹, William (Sulia'n) Johnson¹, Iona Worden-Driscoll ¹, Erica (Samms) Hurley ⁴, Jane McMillan ⁵, Debbie Martin ⁶

¹ Wabanaki- Labrador Indigenous Health Research Network, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

² Department of Sociology, Acadia University, Wolfville, NS, Canada

³ School of Occupational Therapy, Faculty of Health, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

⁴ Faculty of Nursing, Director and Founder of WATERR Lab, an Indigenous Health Lab, Memorial University, Grenfell Campus, Newfoundland and Labrador, Canada

⁵ Anthropology Department, Deveau Institute for Indigenous Governance and Social Justice, St. FX University, Antigonish, Nova Scotia, Canada

⁶ School of Health & Human Performance, Dalhousie University, Halifax, Nova Scotia, Canada

* Jenny R. Rand was a post-doctoral researcher at the time of the gatherings the commentary discusses, and during the drafting of the paper.

DOI: 10.15273/hpj.v6i2.12741

Corresponding author: Jenny R. Rand, jenny.rand@dal.ca

Abstract

Art has become the heart of the Co-Learning Summits funded by the Wabanaki-Labrador Indigenous Health Research Network, the Atlantic regional network within the Canadian Institutes of Health Research's Network Environments for Indigenous Health Research program. In this commentary, the story of how art has come to anchor the summits held in 2019, 2024 and 2025 is shared. Collaboratively planned, these summits convene Indigenous and non-Indigenous community members, Elders, Knowledge Keepers, health practitioners, researchers, and students to build relationships and share knowledge in support of Indigenous health and wellness transformation. These summits are spaces where Indigenous communities, collectives, and organizations contribute to the direction of the Network's work rather than simply being consulted. Tracing the evolution of the summits over six years, this commentary describes the ways that artmaking moved from a feature of the inaugural summit to becoming an organizing principle of those that followed. Across the summits, creative practices – including drumming, song, poetry, found poetry, clay work, beading, graphic recording, podcasting, and the wearing of regalia – have

fostered welcoming, relational spaces that honor multiple ways of knowing. Crucially, this approach is distinct from arts-based research methodologies: at the summits, art is not a tool for gathering data or producing outputs. Rather, it is present because it belongs there, fostering connection, healing, focus, and cultural continuity for art's sake, for health's sake, and for relation's sake. In this commentary, it is argued that centering art challenges Western academic tendencies to separate knowledge sharing from knowledge creation, culture from scholarship, and wellbeing from productivity. In doing so, this story is offered as an invitation to consider what becomes possible when art is recognized as foundational to how communities gather, learn, and advance health together.

Keywords: Wabanaki-Labrador; Art; Indigenous; Health; Atlantic; Community

History of the WLN Co-Learning Summits

The Wabanaki-Labrador Indigenous Health Research Network (WLN) is part of the Network Environments for Indigenous Health Research (NEIHR) Program, a 16-year initiative of the Canadian Institutes for Health Research (CIHR) aiming to advance Indigenous health research that is led by and for First Nations, Métis, and Inuit communities across Canada. Nationwide, there are currently 10 NEIHR networks with the WLN being the Atlantic-NEIHR that supports Indigenous health research across Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Prince Edward Island, and Newfoundland and Labrador through a variety of funding and learning opportunities.

During the WLN's formation, the idea for a Co-Learning Summit emerged, taking shape as its inaugural summit in June 2019 which brought together individuals reflecting the diversity of Indigenous health research interests within the region. More than 70 Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers, health practitioners, decision-makers collaborators and Indigenous and allied health researchers and students from across the Atlantic provinces shared their stories and visions for transforming Indigenous health. Discussions emphasized the importance of ensuring that capacity bridging – the fostering of reciprocal, respectful and reflective relationships between Indigenous researchers and Indigenous Communities, Collectives, and Organizations (ICCOs) to uphold Indigenous self-determination in research and shift away from Western notions of paternalism or saviourism – is both bi-directional and wholistic. Further, capacity bridging aims to ensure that efforts to undertake research remain grounded in Indigenous principles, self-determination, and priorities (Stelkia et al., 2026). Building on these foundational discussions, the WLN facilitates relational, multi-directional learning opportunities that include Indigenous and allied researchers and partners who are committed to listening and learning from and with one another.

Since 2019, two additional summits have been held: one in 2024 at the Mi'kmaw Native Friendship Centre in Halifax, Nova Scotia, and another in 2025 at The Rooms in St. John's, Newfoundland and Labrador. A third summit is planned for fall 2026 in Western Shore, Nova Scotia. These summits serve as knowledge sharing gatherings that showcase WLN-funded research led by ICCOs, whose projects are grounded in the priorities identified within their own communities and regions. The summits also create opportunities for community members, students, healthcare workers, and partners to provide updates on current projects and engage in dialogue. These events have demonstrated that the summits are not just consultative, but generative spaces where ICCOs actively shape the direction of the WLN's work, upholding the principle that research priorities must emerge from the communities the research is intended to serve. Central to how the WLN approaches these gatherings, and what distinguishes the summits from conventional academic conferences, is the intentional and progressive integration of art as both methodology and practice. Although future summits may evolve in theme and structure as the WLN continues to listen to and learn from those

involved, the purpose remains the same: to share, collaborate, and learn from both the successes and challenges of doing Indigenous health research in the region.

Art and Health

At the summits, art is intentionally woven throughout the gathering and conceptualized through an Indigenous lens as a means of knowledge sharing and health promotion. This inclusive approach includes a range of creative practices, such as poetry, music, clay work, drawing, beading, drumming, dance, and multimedia. It also honours the art embodied in attendees' personal and cultural expressions such as ribbon skirts and shirts, beaded earrings, and other clothing, accessories, and regalia chosen to be worn and shared as part of the collective experience. From the WLN's inaugural summit in 2019 which featured dance, drumming, poetry, and graphic recording - a core practice of multi-modal exchange that privileges Indigenous knowledges and creative expression amongst attendees was established. It is this grounding that flows through the ways knowledge is shared and held within the WLN. In this spirit, the following poem, written by Anthanasius Sylliboy at the summit, in 2019, is featured on the wall at the entrance of the WLN office space (Figure 1) and reads:

*Panta'tui Npukikl
(open my eyes)
Panta'tui Nsituaqnn
(open my ears)
Panta'tui Nkamlamun
(open my heart)
Mi'soqo We'ji'k Nsitun
(until I find my voice)
- Anthanasius Sylliboy*



Figure 1: Poem from 2019 Summit; permanently fixed to the wall; written by Anthanasius Sylliboy.

By 2024, following feedback and reflection on previous events, the WLN deepened the commitment to centering art throughout the summit experience. The 2024 gathering intentionally prioritized creativity, culture, and relationships, fostering a meaningful and inclusive space for all attendees alongside making room for healing and self-expression. Artmaking became threaded throughout the entirety of the two days rather than as moments included on the agenda. Attendees were seated at tables in a World Café-style format and encouraged to engage with materials such as clay, coloured pencils, markers, and small canvases. Tables were covered with craft paper, inviting attendees to doodle, sketch, or take notes as they engaged with presentations and discussions throughout the day. Many attendees created mixed-media art pieces that represented emerging themes and ideas from the discussions (Figure 2), adding rich, creative, and visual dimensions to the event. Another creative channel for artistic engagement was found poetry, which involves gathering words from summit presentations, conversations, and materials to create reflective or artistic writing through active listening. Using this approach, attendees crafted poems inspired by the ideas,

words, stories, and sentiments shared throughout the gathering, demonstrating the power of spoken and written words in knowledge exchange and collective meaning-making.



Figure 2: Art created attendees at the 2024 Summit; multiple contributors and media used.

Each day began and ended with drumming and/or song, grounding the gathering in Indigenous traditions and cultural sharing. These practices also brought attendees' focus back to the conversation following scheduled breaks, setting a tone of respect, connection, and positive energy. The WLN is increasingly committed to innovative and culturally grounded approaches to knowledge sharing, recognizing that knowledge lives not only in written texts but also in voices, relationships, and images. Elders have encouraged the network to support individuals in adapting and honouring their stories in ways that reflect how they are meant to be shared. At the gathering, this commitment was reflected through two creative modalities: podcasting and graphic recording. A dedicated podcast corner created space for attendees to share first-person reflections in their own voices. Rooted in Indigenous oral storytelling traditions that centre narrative as an important mode of knowledge transmission, podcasting prioritizes authenticity and lived experience (Wilcox & Napier, 2024). Graphic recording offers an artistically grounded way to carry these stories forward. A Mi'kmaw graphic recording artist visually captured key messages and themes in real time,

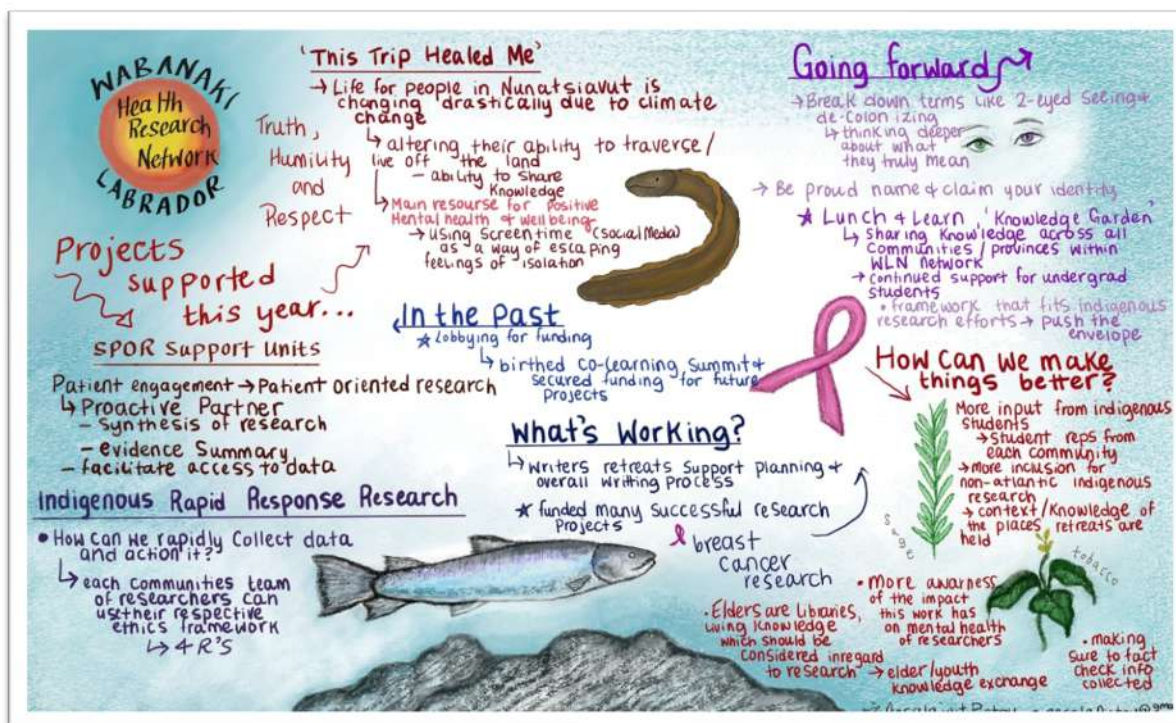


Figure 3: Graphic Recording Art, from 2025 Summit; pastel & ink on paper, digitized; Ansala'wit Pictou

ues

to carry meaning beyond the gathering as a living record and reflection of the relationships, insights, and intentions that emerged. Podcast episodes can be found [here](#), while the graphic artwork from the gathering is woven throughout the WLN's reports, broader materials, and [website](#) (Rand, 2024; WLN, n.d.).

In 2025, the WLN continued to build on its previous approach of placing art at the heart of its programming by featuring the same Mi'kmaw graphic recording artist, Ansala'wit Pictou, providing art materials at every table, and engaging attendees in drumming and song at various points throughout the day. Feedback from previous attendees affirmed the value of this artistic integration, with many noting their appreciation for the diverse forms of creative expression, the sharing of music and the overall format. One attendee shared that despite not identifying as an artist, doodling throughout the gathering helped them remember key moments. Attendees also voluntarily contributed to podcasts to share their stories, further embedding creative expression as a central part of the WLN's knowledge-sharing and co-learning approach.

The summits are a Network activity and a form of community gathering that has evolved over time in response to what Indigenous researchers and ICCOs have identified as their needs. Arts-based methodologies literature offers valuable frameworks that inform this work. Artmaking at the WLN summits is present because it belongs there - because it creates the conditions for the kind of relational, wholistic, and culturally grounded engagement that Indigenous health knowledge sharing calls for. It is not used as a means to gather data or produce research outputs. Rather, its inclusion demonstrates that knowledge can be shared through creative mediums that honour Indigenous cultures, relationships and priorities. Grounded in metaphoric, symbolic, intuitive, sensory, and non-linguistic ways of knowing, Indigenous ontologies recognize art as inherently embedded in cultural practices, relationships, and processes of cultural continuity (Bingham et al., 2025). As a result, arts-based methodologies best align with Indigenous ways of doing research through diverse forms of expression such as digital storytelling, drawing, multimedia arts within community-driven frameworks (Hammond et al., 2018). As a Network, these important methodological contributions are recognized and drawn upon, and artmaking is valued for its inherent capacity to make meaning and connections rather than being taken up as an instrumental purpose for gathering data or disseminating knowledge. In the summits, art is woven throughout for art's sake, for health's sake, for relation's sake. It is a practice, not only a method.

Art creates welcoming spaces, serves as an icebreaker, offers multiple ways for attendees to engage, focus, and reflect, and honours cultural traditions that ground this work. It also supports healing and allows for a relational wellness space (Bingham et al., 2025). When art materials are placed on tables or drumming calls attendees back from break, art is not extracting data, it is fostering well-being, connection, and relational engagement, all of which are central to Indigenous knowledge systems. What one chooses to wear can also be understood as art. Caribou bone earrings, ribbon skirts, and other forms of regalia, for example, may not always be identified as art in the conventional Western sense, yet they were created through the skill, creativity, and knowledge of artists, crafters, and sewers. Wearing these items can be an intentional act of self-expression meant to demonstrate to others that relationality, connection, identity, and place-based knowledges can exist in lived form. In this context, art is not separate from life but embedded in how it is lived.

When embedded within knowledge-sharing gatherings, art can serve as both a method of gathering insights and a knowledge-sharing product, capturing and communicating reflections, experiences, and collective wisdom in accessible and culturally resonant ways. Graphic recordings, poems, songs, and artworks created during the summits become living documents that carry knowledge forward, enabling attendees and wider audiences to engage with research in multisensory ways that promote health, healing, and wellbeing. This integration of art within Indigenous health research knowledge-sharing gatherings respects the relational, holistic, and creative nature of Indigenous knowledge systems, creating space for all attendees to contribute their

voices, perspectives, and ways of knowing. By centering art, the WLN acknowledges that health research and knowledge exchange are more than intellectual exercises as they are also deeply human, cultural, and creative endeavors.

Art as Relational Practice in Indigenous Health Research

This commentary describes the ways in which the WLN Co-Learning Summits create space for multiple ways of knowing, for relationship-building, for creativity to flourish alongside research discourse. What unfolded across three summits was a responsive and relational evolution: art grew from a feature of the 2019 gathering into an organizing principle of the 2024 and 2025 events, guided at each turn by the voices of communities and individuals who came together. Over three summits spanning six years, the WLN reflected and learned that when art is centered in knowledge-sharing gatherings, transformation happens. Graphic recordings become more than visual notes; they reflect collective memory – and found poetry becomes more than creative exercise; it becomes evidence of deep listening. The drumming that calls attendees to gather and the songs that send them home, become more than cultural protocol; they become the heartbeat of reciprocal learning.

The WLN's experience suggests that incorporating art within Indigenous health research gatherings challenges the Western academic tendency to compartmentalize knowledge sharing from knowledge creation, culture from scholarship, and wellbeing from productivity. This story is offered as an invitation to readers and asks: What might become possible when art is recognized as foundational to how communities gather, learn and advance health as a whole? As the WLN looks toward future summits, the commitment to listen, learn, reflect and practice this art-centered approach remains, knowing that the clay shaped by attendees' hands, the poems crafted from shared words, and the rhythms that guide the Network's gathering carry forward knowledge that cannot be captured in academic papers alone - and, that is exactly the point. The story of the WLN Co-Learning Summits is ultimately a story of listening to Indigenous Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and community members whose guidance and leadership have shaped the context of the gatherings and the way that communities gather. The progressive centering of art within and across the summits reflects a commitment to being responsive and relational in practice, not just in principle.

Acknowledgements

We wish to express our deep appreciation to all WLN members for their ongoing contributions and commitments to advancing Indigenous health research in the Wabanaki-Labrador region.

Statement of Ethics

Ethics approval was not required for the work discussed in this commentary nor is this work part of a larger study.

Funding Statement

This work was made possible through funding from the Canadian Institutes of Health Research, CIHR [NI8-169550 & Renewal – NI8-196902].

DHM is supported by a Tier II Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Peoples' Health and Well-Being through the Canada Research Chairs Program (Grant# CRC-2021-00436; <https://www.chairs-chaires.gc.ca/home-accueil-eng.aspx>)

Conflicts of Interest

The author has no conflicts of interest to declare.

References

- Bingham, B., Perry, C., Askarian, S., Burd, L., Paul, D., & Price, E. R. (2025). 'Our bodies are sacred... the information we share with healthcare providers is sacred': Envisioning the future of culturally safe healthcare systems for Indigenous women, Two-Spirit, Indigiqueer and gender diverse peoples. *First Nations Health and Wellbeing-The Lowitja Journal*, 3, 100087. [10.1016/j.fnhli.2025.100087](https://doi.org/10.1016/j.fnhli.2025.100087)
- Hammond, C., Gifford, W., Thomas, R., Rabaa, S., Thomas, O., & Domecq, M. C. (2018). Arts-based research methods with indigenous peoples: An international scoping review. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 14(3), 260-276.
- Rand, J. (Executive Producer). (2024–present). *WLN Shorts* [Audio podcast]. Wabanaki-Labrador Indigenous Health Research Network. Spotify. <https://open.spotify.com/show/1Dya8KEiGp8d7vbiaFEc4l>
- Stelkia, K., Erb, T.L., Botterill, L., & Cecile Barry, J. 2026. From capacity-building to capacity-bridging: Indigenous Research Liaisons as a strategic intervention to bridge Indigenous communities' capacities in the British Colombia health research environment. *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples*, 22(2), 555-561. <https://doi.org/10.1177/11771801251409186>
- Wabanaki-Labrador Indigenous Health Research Network [WLN]. (n.d.) *Wabanaki-Labrador Indigenous Health Research Network*. <https://www.wabanaki-labradornetwork.ca/>
- Wilcox, M., & Napier, K. (2024). Podcasting protocols & pathways: land acknowledgment in outlining a process for decolonial reflexivity and audio stewardship [Article, post-print]. In *Radio Journal: International Studies in Broadcast & Audio Media*. Intellect Books. https://doi.org/10.1386/rjao_00090_1