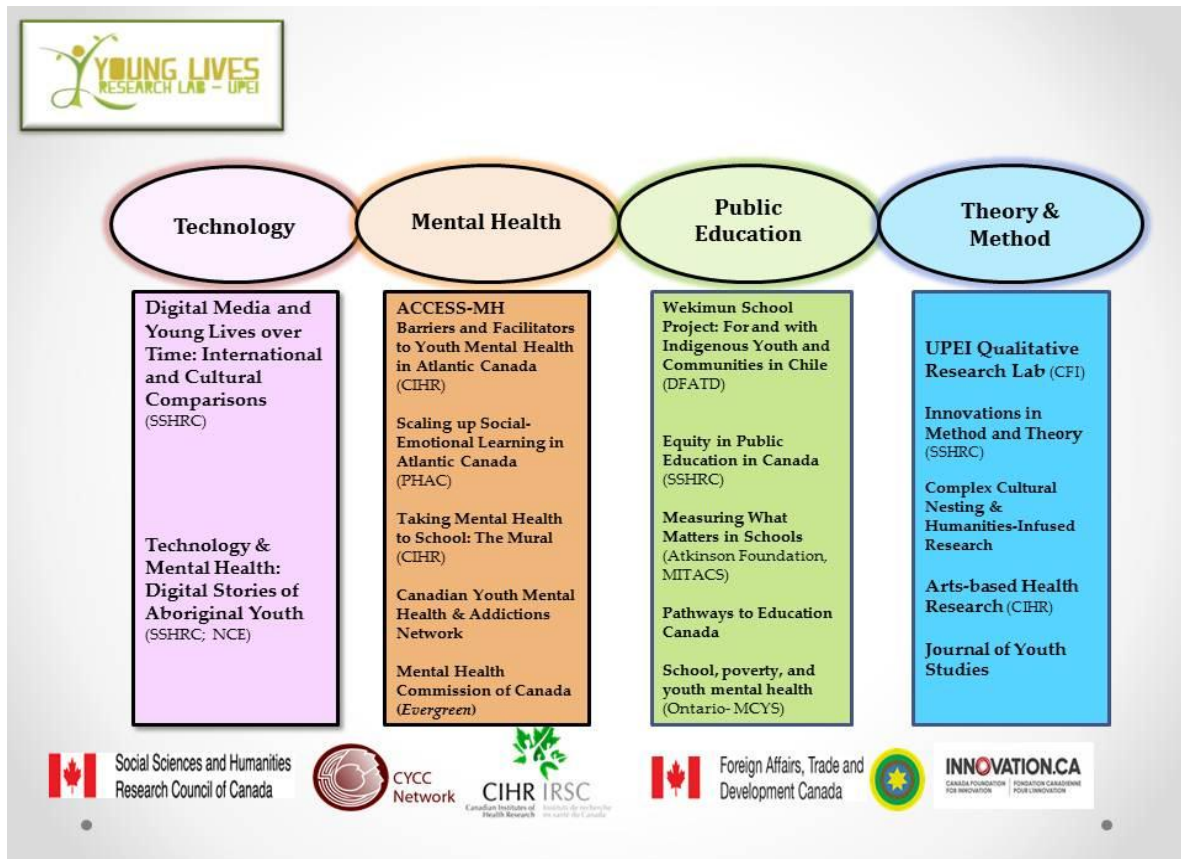


# CYCC Network Knowledge Mobilization Initiative: Final Report

**KMb Initiative:** Engaging Aboriginal Youth in Digital Storytelling: The Intersections of Technology and Mental Health

**Organization:** The Young Lives Research Lab (YLRL), located at the University of Prince Edward Island, is the Lab of Tier I CRC, Dr. Kate Tilleczek (CRC in Young Lives in Global and Local Contexts) in which a group of researchers is dedicated to witnessing and speaking about young lives in both global and local contexts. Tilleczek’s YLRL currently engages in research around 4 key pillars (See Figure 1) the social and educational impacts of technology on young lives, youth pathways to mental health, re-imagining youth education, and emerging youth-attuned theory and methodologies.

Tilleczek’s CRC Lab (YLRL) operates with a core group of dedicated researchers, strengthened by investigators from other UPEI departments, as well as national and international colleagues; our team is rounded out with a dedicated cohort of post-doctoral fellows, as well as graduate and undergraduate students. We promote a collaborative research environment with many people working across projects. See [www.katetilleczek.ca](http://www.katetilleczek.ca) for more information.



**Figure 1: Young Lives Research Lab Key Pillars**

## Initiative Details:

- What the KMB initiative was all about

This project was designed to explore the impacts of technology and digital media on mental health among Aboriginal youth on Prince Edward Island through digital storytelling. We were particularly interested in understanding the role of technology in the everyday lives of indigenous youth participants, and its consequences for their personal and community health and well-being. Through this initiative, however, we also wanted to investigate the value and efficacy of youth-produced filmmaking for synthesizing and communicating the diverse technology-related experiences of youth to both public and research audiences.

This project was also designed to reflect empowering and ethical methodologies appropriate for use both with young participants as well as with aboriginal communities. We therefore designed a flexible framework which employed participatory videography as the primary means to both engage and to learn from participating youth. Youth were trained in various filmmaking skills including development and planning, filming equipment and techniques, audio recording and mixing, and film editing. Participants then drew on these skills to direct the development of their own films to speak to the role of digital media in their lives, and its impact on their personal and/or community health.

The project took place over 12 months and engaged 12 aboriginal youth from the Lennox Island First Nation in various components of the project. Seven youth participated in the entire initiative, and five participants to date have produced a film (alone or in pairs); the remaining youth are continuing to work on their films.

## Impact:

- What changes have you seen as a result of your initiative?
- Have your practices or the practices of others (individuals, organizations, and communities) changed as a result of the initiative?

While our research group has utilized youth-attuned approaches and tools within many other projects (Tilleczek, 2011, 2012, 2014; Tilleczek and Kinlock, 2013), and even employed filmmaking to synthesize and share results and participant perspectives, this project was a new foray into participatory videography that truly positions the youth as co-researchers and filmmakers. This initiative therefore served as a pilot test for us in the strategies, value and effectiveness of youth-produced films to communicate and mobilize youth knowledge and experience (Tilleczek & Loebach, 2015).

While the project served up many challenges (technical, ethical and cultural), we witnessed first-hand how powerfully participatory videography can communicate and mobilize youth perspectives within and beyond their communities, once the youth grasp the notion that they can produce the film on their own terms and in their own voice.

For instance, each of the young participants who produced a film not only embraced the technical aspects of filmmaking and editing, but went above and beyond the project aims to produce a visually and emotionally appealing film that gives the audience a unique glimpse into their daily lives. Several even chose to compose and record their own music to accompany their videos. As researchers, we also found that the digital and visual nature of the film product itself makes it easy and effective to share this knowledge about young lives with many audiences. This initiative allowed us to confirm the power of youth-produced films for engaging youth and sharing their unique perspectives, while helping us to improve and streamline participatory videography methods and tools. However, we have also noted the limitations of video as a research and engagement tool as well (Tilleczek & Loebach, 2015)

Our partner in this project, the Mi'kmaq Confederacy of PEI, has also witnessed the power and value of youth-led filmmaking for not only engaging youth in a creative process and sharing their perspective with the research team, their community, and eventually the world at large, but for giving them the opportunity to develop research, leadership and technical skills. MCPEI intends to utilize the filmmaking equipment, which will be left in their care at the end of the project, project, to continue the project to engage other Aboriginal youth on PEI in digital storytelling. Two of the youth from the project have also been hired for the summer by MCPEI to help produce a documentary film about the Lennox Island community.

○ **What has been the benefit to both your organization and your target audience?**

This project has yielded numerous benefits, opportunities and outcomes for The Young Lives Research Lab, the Mi'kmaq Confederacy of PEI (MCPEI), as well our youth participants and their communities. Below is a short list of some of the academic and non-academic benefits and outcomes to date:

- Drs. Tilleczek & Loebach have drawn upon their experience with this project to publish a peer reviewed paper outlining the methodological benefits and challenges of utilizing participatory video with youth, highlighting this project in particular (See Tilleczek & Loebach, 2015).
- We will also prepare an additional manuscript for another peer reviewed journal with the data from this project

- The project has provided training and experience in filmmaking to local aboriginal youth and MCPEI staff, who will in turn help to train other PEI youth and staff to build on the project and support other filmmaking projects within the aboriginal community.
  - The project has also helped the YLRL to broker a relationship between the Island Media Arts Cooperative (IMAC) and the MCPEI to extend training and filmmaking events to other aboriginal youth and communities on the island. IMAC will also help youth participants to submit their films to youth filmmaking competitions such as 'Reel Youth'. The project also sparked a local interest in aboriginal filmmaking, and we worked with IMAC and MCPEI to arrange for a screening of the new documentary film 'Trick or Treaty' by aboriginal director Alanis Obomsawin to Lennox Island for aboriginal youth and their community.
  - Relationships built during this project are also fostering additional collaborations to share local aboriginal youth knowledge and experience. For example, Youth and Community Workers from the MCPEI have since been invited to participate at the Atlantic Summer Institute (ASI) being organized in collaboration with members of the Young Lives Research Lab. This two-day symposium is focused on child and youth mental health in Atlantic Canada, and is intended to build networks and identify strategies for enhancing regional youth-related programs and policies. MCPEI staff will serve as panelists during the ASI to discuss their work with aboriginal youth, as well as their experience with this project in particular. Youth from Lennox Island will also be invited to participate in the complementary Youth Program, and may have the opportunity to share their films with other ASI attendees as a means of prompting youth discussions around mental health issues and experiences.
  - At the time of this report, three of the youth have also had a chance to show their films to their community during National Aboriginal Day celebrations. The films were well received by the community and the youth received positive feedback on their efforts. The YLRL team is also working on several more opportunities to allow the youth participants to share and discuss their final films with both public and research audiences.
- If you could have done one thing within your initiative differently, what would it have been?

This initiative was a learning process and has helped us to better understand how to design flexible projects that can engage and empower youth. Upon reflection, we would have taken a bit more time to engage youth up front to really develop and cement the aims of the project and to do more work around the goals of both the researchers and the participants. While participants really grasped the 'mental health' component of our discussions, they had more difficulty

reflecting on the role of digital media in their lives, and subsequently were challenged in sharing this experience and knowledge in their films. This may in part be because these particular youth are somewhat less engaged in digital media practices than their youth peers, however, additional time to work with the youth in the early stages would have allowed for more prolonged discussions about this aspect of the project. This is a strategy we will take with us into future projects.

### **Personal Reflections:**

- **Personal reflections from leaders of initiative**

**Dr. Kate Tilliczek, YLRL Director:** I appreciated the ability to focus on a very small project with quick turn around time with these youth. Without the support of an excellent Post-doctoral fellow (paid from different funds) and the support of an excellent partner at MCPEI this would have been impossible to achieve. It was useful to leverage funds from other sources to achieve so much in so little time. The value is in the relationships that have been forged and we will move forward with new funding and projects based on this initiative. The impact on our learning about how better to engage youth to frame and set agendas for examination of mental health and technology was also invaluable. Witnessing the development of the films as both cultural processes and products was extremely valuable.

**Dr. Janet Loebach, Post-Doctoral Fellow / Project Coordinator:** This project provided a substantial learning opportunity for me. While I have worked extensively with youth and am versed in appropriate approaches for collaborating with indigenous participants, this was my first opportunity to work directly with Aboriginal youth and their communities, and to see the impact of various research approaches and practices. The project, and the participants, defied many of my expectations, and it was a valuable reminder to me as a researcher to pre-expose my own assumptions and to constantly attempt to hear and share the authentic voices of the participants throughout the process, whatever they may be. The participants were extremely warm, funny, and enthusiastic, making the project extremely enjoyable and rewarding. It was a privilege to be invited into their lives and communities, and was an extremely valuable learning experience.

- **Personal reflections from participants**

As requested, we also solicited feedback from several youth participants, as well as their Youth Worker from the Mi'kmaq Confederacy, about their experience with the initiative. These reflections were synthesized in a short video that accompanies this report.

## Moving Forward

- How has this initiative influenced the way your organization approaches knowledge mobilization

The project also reinforced for us the power of hands-on and art-based initiatives for more actively engaging youth in research, and for the diverse voices they can elicit. The filmmaking process and products were both very valuable media around which we could discuss the concepts of digital media and mental health with the youth. The tangible and accessible nature of the film products was also found to be very effective for communicating and sharing youth perspectives both with and beyond our research team; we plan to continue using video and other arts-based approaches to synthesize and mobilize the unique experiences of youth.

The participatory nature also further demonstrated to us that youth can be active, effective, and informed co-researchers, and that projects progress more effectively when youth participants are actively helping to shape the design. The videography component was also somewhat new to us as a team, and while the learning curve was fairly steep, it proved to be an incredibly rewarding and useful tool, and it was exciting to see how easily and enthusiastically the youth participants took to the medium. As a team we learned a great deal in terms of the technical, practical and ethical use of videography with youth that will support further film-based research endeavors in the future.

We are currently working with the youth participants to register and license their rights to their films, and to embed this information within the films themselves. Once this process is complete, participants have agreed to share their final films with the *Young Lives Research Lab* and the *Children and Youth in Challenging Contexts Network* and allow both groups to showcase the films on their website. Digital versions of the final films will be forwarded to both groups as soon as is possible.

## More Information

Kate Tilleczek's Young Lives Research Lab: [www.katetilleczek.ca](http://www.katetilleczek.ca)

Mi'kmaq Confederacy of PEI: [www.mcpei.ca](http://www.mcpei.ca)

Island Media Arts Cooperative: [islandmedia.pe.ca/](http://islandmedia.pe.ca/)

Atlantic Summer Institute 2015: [www.asi-iea.ca/en/asi-2015/](http://www.asi-iea.ca/en/asi-2015/)

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