

UNLOCKING CREATIVE WRITING THROUGH IN4D-INDIGENOUS CIY NATURE JOURNALING: THE INDIGENOUS VOICE

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Abstract

This study examined the perceptions of the participants on the In4d-Indigenous CIY nature journaling, their challenges in writing and how the journaling has influenced their creative writing in English Language learning. The methodology adopted for this study was an exploratory study. The instrument employed were document analysis of the In4d-Indigenous CIY Nature Journaling and focus group interview. The participants for this study were 29 Indigenous undergraduates (N=6 male, 23= female) pursuing the Bachelor of Education in Iban Studies. The data from nature journaling amplified that the participants expressed their ideas in writing with elements of creative skills, critical thinking skills and emergence of character in articulating ideas for the journal. The data of focus group interview revealed that the In4D-Indigenous CIY nature journaling was a driver that connected technology-aided meaningful outdoor learning with nature, and how the environment was 'an inspirational teacher'. On a positive note, the challenges were expressed as 'opportunity for improvement' rather than threats. The In4d-Indigenous nature journaling indicated an encouraging and constructive influence pertaining to creative writing with six emerging themes: learner autonomy, shift attitude towards language learning, risk-taking, constructors of knowledge, technology exploration and creative-aesthetic value. This study has navigated direction for adopting an Inspired by Nature for the Indigenous CIY nature journaling, yet aspects of new pedagogies for deep learning and 21st Century Skills could be interwoven with nature for a more transformative eco-literacy research.

Keywords: *In4d-Indigenous CIY nature journaling*

INTRODUCTION

To unlock creative writing is to unravel the inventiveness of writing. To unlock creativity is to unlock the minds of the learners with tasks that interest them. With doors as opportunity to unleash the power of creativity, we need the key to unlock, untangle and unknot creative writing for unconventional learning space that induces inspiration. Babae (2015) emphasizes that creative writing is an awareness raising activity whereby learner's self-esteem is enhanced, playful language is allowed with learner's deep engagement in learning process: motivating and enjoyable. It has the prospective to reveal learners' identity and self-discovery regardless of any teacher's interference, intervention or even demands on grades and comments. (Senel, 2018). Thus, creative writing can be viewed as the compass that stir and steer the creativity domain.

The anatomy of creative writing encompasses of the production of texts with aesthetic value; be it informative, instrumental or pragmatic in nature. Likewise, creative writing draws more heavily on intuition, close observation, imagination, and personal memories. (Maley, A. & Peachey, N.,2015). Hence, the role of the teacher is to tap on the creativity node and activate the point of creativity.

Being the English Language teacher educators, teaching Indigenous undergraduates of the Iban Studies was thought-provoking and perplexing. English as the global language functions as a necessity that lubricates the mastery of global competencies which is much needed for a 21st Century enthusiastic learner. Feeling determined to train and educate the Indigenous undergraduates, with training kit and well prepared lecture notes, the anticipation did not match the needs. The participants expressed their preference to learn English differently. They have experienced repeatedly 'a predictable unquestionable conventional lecturers' mode of training' monotonous in their undergraduate study, unvaried and colorless.

With the compulsory pass for English Language Proficiency course, it added more anxiety amongst them. They were afraid of low grades being of average proficiency. Their greatest fear was the assignment phobia of creative writing which has been a difficult skill. They expressed the lack of repertoire of vocabulary and ideas to write. Nonetheless, much to all these disturbing factors, it was their reflective turn that led them to express their needs and fondness to learn English as they wanted to be global players in the 21st century.

The realization of insecurities amongst the Indigenous undergraduates, ignited the researchers' passion to support them in this learning quest. Propelled by these driving factors, the researchers were enthused to introduce nature journaling as the generator powerhouse for ideas and expressions for creative writing.

Considering the culture of being close to nature amongst the Indigenous undergraduates, the researchers were inclined to outdoor learning to revitalize enthusiasm of learning creative writing using an innovative approach: Inspired by Nature for the Indigenous Create-It-Yourself Nature Journaling (In4d Indigenous CIY Nature Journaling).The In4d-Indigenous CIY Nature Journaling is an innovative approach to enhance creative writing skills, designed to incorporate

nature and environment as an outdoor learning experience of learning English language. Framing the innovative approach with already existing domain (nature), we do not need a light house school with extra resources to be innovative. (Fullan and Scott, 2014).

As Indigenous undergraduates, their way of life is closely knitted to nature, environment and natural world as they depend on nature as their main source of economic livelihood. (Rahman, et.al 2018). The inclusiveness and exclusiveness of nature was built-in the innovative approach, in tangent with familiarity of home as a 'safe environment' and a non-threatening context, fundamental for learning to take place. The learning tasks were constructed and aligned to the content of their proficiency course. It was hoped that it would stimulate the participants' interest and enhance creative writing inspired by nature.

If the In4d-Indigenous was the catalyst of ideas, then the CIY (Create-It-Yourself) nature journaling was the key to unlock it. Kelly Johnson (2014) illustrates nature journaling as the connection of elements of venue, assimilation of experience, discovering, facilitating and cultivating observational skills; with the potential to develop Naturalist Intelligence. (Howard Gardner, 1983) It functions as a passage joining student's connection to the natural world. (Ripa, 2016)

Nature journaling has been widely researched in environmental education and science. Nonetheless, there was inadequacy of research on English language teaching using nature journaling with undergraduates. Likewise, research in creative writing in second and foreign language is less favorably investigated. With this study, it will integrate elements of environment, language teaching, and interdisciplinary of science with a cross-curriculum dimension. Thus, this study has a promising future direction to narrow the gap in these aspects and bridge the lack of research in language teaching in these areas.

By the same token, the In4d-Indigenous CIY nature journal would postulate the room for exploration of ideas to craft creative writing. With the most apt key to unlock creative writing, therefore this study would add value to the literature of creative writing in English Language teaching advocating nature journaling. The disclosures and the present state-of-the-art of the Indigenous undergraduates necessitates the urgency to address the needs and proposed an effective strategy to learn English and develop creative writing without tears or fears. Therefore, the researchers embarked on this exploratory study to address the issues at hand.

With these issues in sight and the research gap identified, it certainly warranted an exploratory study to examine the viewpoints of the Indigenous participants on what is In4d-Indigenous nature journaling, how they perceive challenges in writing the journal and in what ways the journaling has influence their creative writing.

Objectives

- (i) To explore the views of In4d-Indigenous CIY nature journaling amongst the Indigenous participants
- (ii) To identify the challenges in writing the nature journaling

- (iii) To examine how nature journaling could have influenced the participants' creative writing in the nature journaling.

Research questions

- (i) How do you perceive In4d-Indigenous CIY nature journaling?
- (ii) How do you define the challenges that you faced in nature journaling?
- (iii) How does nature journaling influence your creative writing skills?

METHODOLOGY

The methodology advocated in this study was exploratory study. It focused on the instruments: document analysis of the nature journal and focus group interview. The participants for this study were 29 (N=6 males=23 females) Indigenous undergraduates Bachelor of Education in Iban Studies for primary Education. They were between 19-20 years of age. It was compulsory for them to take the English language Proficiency course of 3 credits (30 hours interaction time). Being culturally bound and inherit a rich cultural diversity, nature and environment are part of their ecosystem.

The document analysis was based on the In4d-Indigenous CIY nature journals. The participants have the freedom to create their journal as they please. They were required to reflect, construct and write their own creative stories on the activities that were conducted outdoors. The nature journals were collected for data analysis of expressions based on learning experiences. The data collected from the focus group were transcribed verbatim with salient points categorized into themes.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The findings will be discussed based on the In4d Indigenous CIY nature journaling and research questions in this study. It is graphically represented in Figure 1. Roadmap of findings and discussion.

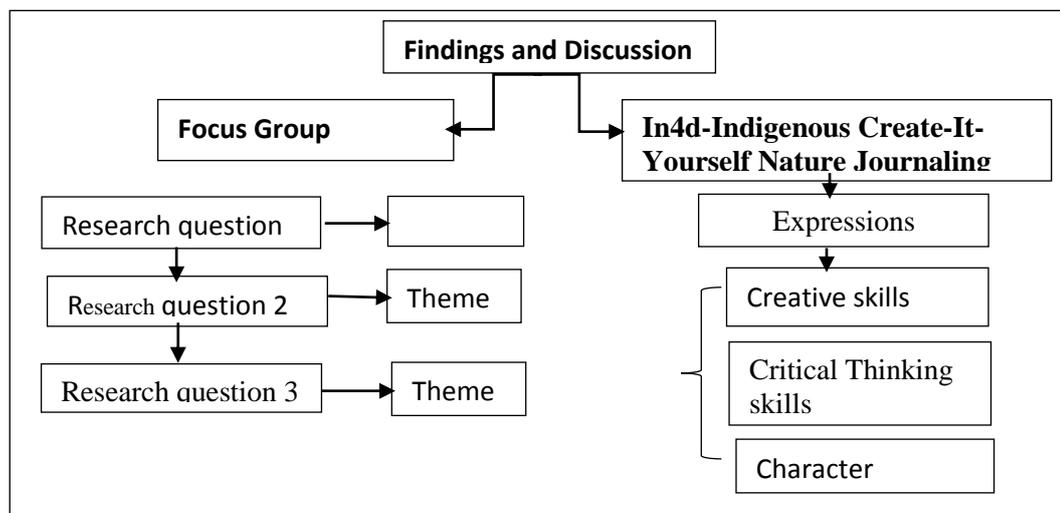


Figure 1. Roadmap of findings and discussion

In4d-Indigenous Create-It-Yourself Nature Journaling

The data extracted from the journal were the corpus based on narrative expressions of learning experiences written by the participants to illustrate the 3 different activities. The activities were Paint My language, Photography Story Collage and My dry garden (If a teacher is a Gardener). Being immersed in nature and the environment of the campus, they explored the activities, generated ideas and expressed them to create their journals successfully. Given the challenge to produce the journal, the participants managed to overcome it in imaginative ways. The emerging themes drawn from the corpus were three distinctive ones: creative thinking, critical thinking skills and character. (3Cs)

Creative skills

The uniqueness of the expressions displayed their creative edge. The participants illustrated very different yet creative style of writing, size, material and design. Their inclination of beauty, artwork and creative language were obvious in their journals. Every journal was colorful, artistic and has a face of its own, with unique written language. They related the stories to trees, flowers and gave life to them as humans. The personification was largely exploited with nature. For instance: a yellow flower was drawn: named Yellowmina in a creative story with creative titles: The lonely lamp post, fragrance of friendship. This creativity craze depicted different colors inside the participants synonym to a rainbow (Senel, 2018). This illustrated their inner strength from big-picture planning to meticulous organization. The participants thought differently than convention demanded, created original stories inspired by nature. The essence of this discussion depicted the combination of their creative skills that worked best with 21st century skills.

Critical Thinking Skills

It was noticeable that participants made decision about what to write. They expressed their writings based on their critical thinking and reflection of activities. They analysed the ideas, structure the writing and communicate ideas effectively in an organised manner with varied genres of writing. For instance, in the activity Paint My Language, the participants wrote a story (The battlefield) or poem (Night and Day). This indicated that they were cognitively challenged, generated ideas to create different genres of creative writing. They managed to integrate creativity and critical thinking skills into their writing. Creating stories and poems is equally aesthetic and critical for enhancing writing skills.

Character

The aspect of character, one of the 6Cs key future skills (Fullan & Langworthy 2014) emerged as an important entity. The element of noticing was evident in the writings as the participants were aware and discovered self-regulated behaviours and action. Utterances were “planned, outlined, adjusted, drafts, controlled”. Common expressions of participants were “determined, working very hard, struggling, much effort to complete the journal”. These were indeed the self-discovery of determination, hard work and learning experiences.

The attributes of character can be observed not just by their expressions but through the behaviours and attitude towards completing the journal.

The following discussion focused on the data obtained from the focus group interview based on the research questions. The data derived from the interview were based on the views of the participants on In4d-Indigenous nature journaling. The findings will be discussed in the light of themes. To substantiate the worth of the evidence, the following highlight compelling expressions by the participants that echoed the themes.

Research question 1:

How do you perceive In4d-Indigenous CIY nature journaling?

The emerging themes focused on the In4d-Indigenous nature journaling as a driver that connected nature journaling as a technology-aided, meaningful outdoor learning with nature, and how the environment was ‘an inspirational teacher’.

These expressions magnified the intensity of views from the participants that drove the motivation to meaningfully link nature journal to technology.

“In4d-Indigenous CIY nature journal is a place to write creatively with fun English in nature outside the classroom. It helped me discover, imagine nature, motivated my writing. I learn to write with nature. If I don’t know I use my computer to explore.”

Equally significant remarks were “The journal, I’m excited and confident to learn English writing by creative approach in the environment”. They made the association clear by saying “A journal that I’m motivated and wrote my mind...my thinking and my feelings. I refer to my laptop and internet to help me for information to do the activities and check my grammar”. They mentioned “very creative writing journal, a lot of language and art, eager to learn English, the internet world and myself...”

Influenced and inspired by nature, a participant mentioned that “My CiY nature journal is all about nature and me, my feelings, my head. It taught me a great deal.” With technology and environment as the inspiration, the relevance to 21st century was emphasized as “I apply my expert area as 21st century learner, my best friend is my laptop.” Similar comments were “it’s a place to think back, I remembered nature, I got some fresh ideas but crazy ones too. I referred to internet. It helped me create the stories when I imagined how beautiful the nature is.”

With remarkable statements expressed as: ‘My journal is a special place I pour out my feelings about studying English. Actually, there’s a lot of secrets I write too about how I feel learning. It’s a very creative way to learn English outside. I use my laptop to explore the internet for examples and downloading materials about all the activities. I’m a 21st century learner: My favourite activity, my dry garden pressed flowers “if the teacher is the gardener’. I can connect nature with my learning. Nature inspired my learning like my lecturer.” This voice amplified the connectedness of ideas, nature journaling being technology-aided and how inspired they were via the environment with the 21st century skills.

Research question 2:

How do you define the challenges that you faced in nature journaling?

The data from the participants were categorized into themes and best encapsulated as ‘opportunity for improvement’ rather than threats. The participants were engaged in decision-making and problem-solving to overcome the challenges. These can be amplified in the light of their expressions as solving challenges independently, technology-aided, with collaborative peers and consulting the lecturer.

Solving challenges independently

The claims made by the participants were challenges related to situations encountered in the process of doing the journal. Instances such as ‘recreating missing contents of narratives and stories in the journal due to editing and lack of time’ were probably the most frequent challenge they faced. There were occurrences indicating solving problems of materials used. Expressions such as: “I forgot to buy sketchbook so I use A4 paper and color paper to replace the sketch book.” Another participant described the challenges in terms of reprinting and resizing of pictures: “The size of the picture was too large for my journal. I had to adjust the size of the image smaller. I solved the problem gladly when I apply my creativity such as sticking a small booklet in a long piece of paper to fill the space”.

Despite the challenges, they managed to overcome them by being positive towards their own learning and achievement. They acted on it by making that decision to continue doing it as mentioned: “But I take it positively, I must do it so that I could learn, if I lack of ideas I refer to examples from internet. I focus to write well by re-writing till I get good writing.” The motivation to complete it was the driving force to continue the task and decisions made were positive thinking towards independent execution.

Technology-aided

Technology was an important tool to solve the problems at hand. The significance of technology was a fundamental link between the participants and the use of digital tools. Technology was highly exploited by the participants to learn English as stated “my challenges in making the nature journaling is my vocabulary. So I explore English words in google. It helps me to complete the tasks.”

Interestingly stated “I overcome the challenges in producing this journal by using reference from the internet such as "Malay English Translator" for correct terminology and information that may help me.” This showed how technology aided bilingual language translator was necessary to execute the activity. Such experience resonated with another participant when he claimed that he experienced difficulty to write grammatically correct sentences in English. He referred to the internet or the dictionary to ensure the words or sentences used were right. With his difficulty in using digital technology, he consulted friends. This learning experience led to his improvement of digital technology knowledge.

Collaborative Learning

With collaboration being an important 21st century skill, the following utterances amplified its magnitude. The relevance by collaborating with peers can be enriched by these utterances. It signified teamwork, cooperation, tolerance and selflessness.

“During Paint My Language activity, we did not have any coloring pallets. So, we have to be creative and utilize the raindrops on the leaves to be our pallets. Everyone got excited when cleaning the leaves and forgot to take pictures. This situation required us to help each other, cooperate and collaborate by sharing the same pictures. Fortunately, every challenges that I faced in nature journaling can be solved when everybody is working as one team to complete the journal.’

Capturing the other participants’ views on collaborative learning, they asked for opinion on English language learning, advice to improve digital technology knowledge and to learn new skills such as using the computer software. These collaborative learning efforts provided the participants with meaningful goals, a platform for collective effort in the learning process, individual accountability of doing the task and mutual understanding to provide solutions. (Ali Z., 2018). These collaborations fostered the enhancement of critical thinking through discussion, clarification of ideas and encouraged the practice of higher order thinking skills.

Consulting the Lecturer

What appeared to be an obstacle to complete the nature journal required decision making skill and problem solving skills by the participants in overcoming the challenges. The participants articulated that “I seek advice and support from my lecturer. I run out of idea how to write creatively. I discussed with my lecturer how to write creative poem. I refer and ask my lecturer to check my story.” These instances definitely assured the importance of the ‘teacher as an activator’ a dynamic interactive role with the ‘student’. This demonstrated the mutual trust and reciprocal accountability that highlighted the participants’ new role as learning partner with the researchers. With appropriate scaffolding and opportunities, it would develop the participants to become lifelong learners individually and collectively. Not only create knowledge in the learning process but more importantly to be able to transfer the learning in real-world contexts. This illustrated the unique thread of learning partnership established between participant and lecturer as one of the key future skills. (Fullan & Langworthy (2014).

Research question 3:

How does nature journaling influence your writing skills?

The In4d-Indigenous nature journaling indicated an encouraging and constructive influence pertaining to writing with six emerging themes: learner autonomy, shift attitude towards language learning, risk-taking, constructors of knowledge, technology exploration and creative-aesthetic value.

Learner Autonomy

An obvious reflective writing from the participants was their ability to make their own decisions. They were happy that they had the freedom to write whatever they felt based on their own learning experiences. They claimed to have the freedom to be leaders in their groups. They were capable to set the direction of their learning curve. Utterances such as “I am unique. I have individual power, I create myself, my style, my way” clearly hinged on the power relation as a leader and individual. This view concurred with another intriguing view that specified “no lecturer, I’m free” that denoted without immediate teacher interference. The participants were responsible, self-directed for managing their learning process and achievement of task fulfilment as autonomous learners. With their perceptions on their own learning experiences showed a link to learner agency, a concept in 21st century education.

Shift attitude towards language learning

The participants articulated their feelings about their beliefs about English language learning. They connected a historical chronology of English language learning experience between the years in school and the present time. Their attitude of English language learning and writing has changed from a different focus on language learning: from examination oriented to inspired learning mode. The expressions were communicated as “in school, I always think English is a killer subject, writing is the most difficult skill, write creatively more difficult”. They studied because “it was examination oriented. Very boring” The years they spent in schools were “textbook and workbooks only” and always “a lot of teacher talk”.

On the contrary, with a positive note, they were “happy to do the journal and enjoyed learning English with outdoor activities”. They were being inspired by nature through In4d-Indigenous CIY nature journaling that kept them in sync with fun-filled creative writing. They enjoyed the outdoor classes with the new innovative approach. They discovered the importance language learning by connecting with nature.

The shift in attitude moved along the continuum of focus and their thinking from being less positive to beyond positive. In4d-Indigenous CIY nature journaling was a powerful mechanism that boosted their self-confidence and uplifted their motivation to learn creative writing. This learning experience was definitely a great teacher, one that developed their optimistic attitudinal disposition towards their learning.

Risk-taking

Risk-taking occurred across multiple aspects of the learning process of creating the In4d-Indigenous CIY nature journaling amongst the participants. The common aspects that indicated risk-taking amongst participants were the willingness to explore the unknown and collaboration. The willingness to explore the unknown can be summarized with utterances such as “first time writing the CIY nature journal, but will try my best to complete it, do it my way”, “No idea

how to do it, but will explore the internet” and trying something new. Learning to work with new activities and resources can be challenging too.

Each writing was significantly crafted with string of words they know best. The expressions such as “writing with my limited vocabulary could be challenging but anyway I will write my best and make it interesting. I got nature, it helps me to think beautifully.” A noticeable aspect was making changes to the writing in the journal. It clearly amplified the learning process and process of creativity. Words such as “write again to make it good”, “checked a few times”, “edit for mistakes”, “changed to nicer words”, “rewrite”, best illustrated an exploratory endeavor of writing and risk-taking.

The process of collaboration was a big risk yet challenging. It emphasised on “to be outside my comfort zone, “trying to convince friends to agree with my opinions” to “getting negative feedback”. There was a strong inclination of ‘fitting in’ with different opinions and reaching a consensus. The voicing of their opinions to others was inherently risky. Integrally significant the risk is synonymous to ‘sailing in uncharted water. (Giddens, 1999 cited in Choi, Payne, Hart and Brown, 2018)

Constructors of knowledge

Being constructors of knowledge, the participants were able to generate ideas through nature. They demonstrated interpretation of the learning experiences through the stories. Their ability to judge quality or importance of data. Through the nature journal, they made inferences of the characters, related them, interpret, analyse and evaluate to draw conclusion to their stories. They used details to write their narratives, stories or poems. They constructed new ideas and gave life to characters. For instance: “They killed my family, they cut them all. I am alone now, the shortest tree around but I must be strong and survive in this forest.”

An aspect of constructors of knowledge was the influence and exploitation of technology such as the internet. The participants search the engines to solve problems of writing, grammar or even ideas to write story. For example: “Interesting to use ICT for information on creative writing and stories. I exploit internet for information, ‘The teacher is a gardener’, referred to names of flowers, explore and interpret the character of flowers as ‘a teacher’. I created my own garden as my classroom and each flower I choose are the things I want in my class. Example: purple flower means motivation, pink means patience, HOTS really.” They wrote by making comparisons of characters or features of items to solve the conflict in the stories. The collaboration in working out challenges was also aided with technology. The participants constructed new knowledge through a process of thinking, reflecting and reasoning to help them discover new connections. The learning experience and the process of creativity throughout the process of creating the nature journal posited a constructivist orientation with the emphasis on new knowledge in real contexts.

Technology exploration

With a focus on search and exploration for information to write stories and poems, the participants experienced a meaningful learning process. The

continuum of technology exploration flowed through a continuum from basic uses of technology to high level uses of technology.

The data revealed that the participant was dependent of the online dictionary or internet for the inspiration to write. The exploration of technology was manifested in writing when the participants relied on IT skills besides writing the journal. The creative writing was evident through the graphic organizer which was elaborated with short notes. “When I make short notes before I write my story, I use the mind map. Then my note expansion.”

Another participant adamantly stated “CIY Nature Journal make me more creative to use Microsoft PowerPoint, Microsoft Word for concept map to explore about nature such as types of flowers, environment, design my own garden.” Thus, ICT skills were very important for the production of nature journaling and also beyond the classroom for future life and real-world context. An important connection was established between technology and being 21st century future teacher. Digital tools and resources have the potential to enable, expand and accelerate learning. This certainly will improve their 21st skill, as a 21st future teacher.

Creative-aesthetic value.

The creative–aesthetic value was the most prominent feature of the In4d-indigenous CIY nature journaling. Creativeness could be mirrored through the construct of their writing stories or poems. It magnified the rich texture of language in a creative manner. The elements of creativity were enhanced in the context of writing nature journaling influences. The participants confidently expressed “nature gives me imagination and inspiration. I wrote my stories beautifully with drawings, visuals and colours.” The participants demonstrated creativity-aesthetic value when nature journaling made them more creative in art of decorating. The writing skills helped them create an appealing notebook too. The exploration of words for creative writing suggested the flow of creativity and the value of aesthetic was translated in words in an appealing manner.

The influence of environment and space was emphasized by the participant as “the environment plays an important role in writing my poem ‘The last teen girl’. It influences my thinking. I can produce creative works inspired with influence of the environment. The surroundings were very quiet, with a large, spacious space that allowed me to think creatively.”

With such impressive utterances, it clearly demarcated the appeal of In4d-Indigenous CIY nature journaling to the participants. Their views significantly rooted nature, creative writing and learning in a coherent connection. The In4d-Indigenous nature journaling symbolised a mechanism that drew the participants in the world of imagination through nature, maneuvered ideas, activated their reflective thoughts, advocated technology as a resuscitation gadget and creatively articulated their stories in writing. As the participants stated “CIY nature journaling is the one of the best way to learn English. I feel that this journal has given me a lot of benefits such as how to write or find information in English. Doing this journal also enhances my thinking skill and my creativity in

completing my journal. In my opinion, this journal is a great way for future teachers to add 21st century teaching knowledge.”

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATION

At the heart of this study, the researchers attempted to illuminate greater visibility of the learning process of creative writing through In4d-Indigenous Create-It-Yourself (CIY) nature journaling. The link to engage the participants in a more transparent learning process was magnified in the findings.

The portrait painted on nature journaling augmented the interrelated strands of creative skills, critical thinking skills and character. The drive that nature journal possessed certainly propelled the connectedness between technology and nature. With its educative value as an inspirational teacher, nature stands towering in its existence. Challenges were seen as ‘opportunities for improvement’. The significant influences of nature journaling were encouraging-constructive 6-dimensions themes of learner autonomy, shift attitude towards language learning, risk-taking, constructors of knowledge, technology exploration and creative-aesthetic value. Most importantly, In4d-indigenous nature journaling has the potential to unlock creativity and frame creative writing. It captured the invaluable learning experiences of creative process of the participants thus equipped them with 21st century tools as a promising 21st century teacher.

With the enhanced self-confidence in writing and proactive disposition as a 21st century future teacher, it is hoped that the participants will create value and significance for the community of practice, community and global technological-driven world. Being optimists and enthusiasts of this, aspects of new pedagogies for deep learning and 21st Century Skills could be interwoven with nature for a more transformative eco-literacy research. If the In4d-Indigenous CIY nature journaling can unlock the door of creative writing, it would certainly be the point of departure for an osmosis of shifting ideas in creativity of language learning to warrant the Indigenous legitimate voice.

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