The uncomfortable spaces of in-between

Born and raised in Croatia until she was 11 years old, Ana was uprooted from that life, and became an immigrant to Canada. For some time she had felt a deep loss of her “sense of home.” Her entire family still lived in Croatia, and when visiting there, her accent was changed to the point that she was mistaken as a tourist. Yet, at the same time in Canada, her language still drew questions about her ethnicity. Seeing herself as being hyphenated between two cultures, she wondered about her place in the world, and how to answer when people questioned, where are you from? Ana’s involvement in the Indigenous Institute led her to frame her original inquiry question around what it might mean to be indigenous as a bi-cultural person. Further, she asked: “What is identity? What is indigenous identity? For students who aren’t Aboriginal, what does it mean to them to be indigenous?” And finally, she asked “How am I indigenous?” Ana focused on self-study was supplemented by careful readings (including Aoki, Bhabha and Wah), discussions with a thinking friend, and artistic expression.

As her inquiry progressed, Ana began to wonder if hyphenated space might be key to finding her own indigeneity, her sense of belonging to a place. While acknowledging that it remained at the depths of her inquiry, she moved away from an exploration of indigeneity to focus on what it meant to live in hyphenated spaces. Ana explored many questions around language and began to see that hyphenated spaces existed as binaries. She realized that she would need to pay careful attention to what she was hyphenating and how she was labeling. She tried to avoid the binary of self and other, seeking new ways of articulating, “what it is to be me.” She learned that “the meaning is not in-between the cultures, but within both” and that hers is an inquiry of “the uncomfortable spaces of in-between.” She was heartened to realize that the concept of home may not be tied to physical location.

In their conversations around the topic of hyphenated space, Ana listened carefully to the stories of her thinking friend DM, who had moved from a small northern community and felt out of place within her current urban university environment. Ana was struck by the fact that hyphenated spaces could be experienced within national boundaries as well, for example Yukon-Canadian, French Canadian, etc. “As the population grows, moves and mingles, the more people are left in an ambiguous territory of hyphenation.” While focusing primarily on culture and language gaps, she realized that the hyphen could also be expanded to include people who struggled with sexuality and other identity issues as well, writing “everyone has in-between spaces and worlds they need to navigate,” such as daughter-student, child-adult, and student-teacher. As a teacher, Ana began to see the importance of understanding the ambiguous territory of her own hyphenated spaces, believing that her inquiry would make it easier for her to understand the diversity of her students and their need to embrace their own private spaces of in-between.

Ana explored through collage and painting, the gap between two ways of life. She realized that the space she was searching for, was one she already lived in. Near the
end of her inquiry, she represented herself in the image below as being squeezed between worlds, feeling isolated and not belonging. She wrote:

I now realize that while this is still partially true, I need to reclaim this middle ground as my place of indigeneity – it is mine alone to claim and it is the only place that cannot be taken away from me. I think this is invaluable insight to know as a future teacher of indigenous students – within the in-between, they may be able to find their own indigenous hyphenated space that bridges their culture with the Eurocentric one, and find a place that can not be colonized, marginalized or assimilated. I no longer think of my space as this place, stuck between rocks and external pressures; rather, I now think of my collage and my painting and all that I have learned through this inquiry project, and feel a sense of peace and pride in my created and re-claimed space.

As she explained her work to her peers in the sharing session, Ana was surprised at how her paintings captured the depth and layers of her thought processes around her inquiry. For example, she realized her use of grey in another painting of an Arbutus tree could “easily represent the space between black and white” and that the intertwining of two trees represents how she lives within her two cultures. Having the time to question her own identity inspired her and left her with many ideas for future writing and creative projects around her inquiry of self.