

A relatable approach to research

ASU's Relate Lab sits at intersection of Indigenous studies, environmental science and storytelling

By Marshall Terrill , ASU News
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On a warm April afternoon inside Arizona State University's [Rob and Melani Walton Center for Planetary Health](#), a group gathers around a table in a conference room — laptops open, notebooks scattered, Post-it notes and postcards conveying personal messages, conversation moving easily between science and story.

About a dozen participants sit in person, others join online, some are eating, but the tone is unmistakably communal. No one appears to be “studying” anyone else. Instead, they are working with one another.

This is the [Relate Lab](#), a young but rapidly evolving initiative at ASU that brings together students, scholars, nonprofits and community members to rethink how research is done and for whom.

Founded in 2024, the lab sits at the intersection of Indigenous studies, environmental science and storytelling, with an explicit aim to build something more reciprocal, more human.

At first glance, it might look like just another academic program. But the longer you sit in the room, the more it becomes clear that something different is happening here. Conversations are less about extracting answers and more about building relationships. Knowledge is not delivered; it is shared.

“The foundation of the Relate Lab is relationality,” co-director [Liliana Caughman](#) said. “It’s this interconnection between everything — the sciences, the stories, the communities. We want them on equal footing.”

Caughman, an assistant professor of American Indian studies, describes the lab as an answer to a long-standing problem in academia.

“Our lab was really born from an idea about ethical and useful academic research,” she said. “Something that is deeply embodied and experiential, but also collective.”

That framing is deliberate. For generations, Indigenous communities have been the subjects of research that extracted knowledge without giving much back. The Relate Lab attempts to invert that model.

Its work is community-based, collaborative and rooted in what Caughman calls "real results," whether that means restoring water systems, rethinking disaster response or reshaping how people understand their relationship to place.

For [Jerome Clark](#), Relate Lab co-director and co-founder, the intellectual grounding runs even deeper.

"At its core, the lab is motivated by Indigenous ideas of relationships," said Clark, an assistant professor in ASU's [American Indian Studies program](#). "We're asking, how do we understand the systems that create imbalance in our communities, and how do we restore balance?"

Connecting stories to research

Clark, who approaches the work from the humanities, often speaks in terms of stories. Not just narratives in the literary sense, but the broader stories societies tell about themselves.

"There are stories that shape our world," he says. "Stories that determine who belongs, who doesn't and what the future looks like."

The Relate Lab did not begin as a formal research center. It began as a class.

In 2024, Caughman, Clark and American Indian Studies Teaching Professor [Michelle Hale](#), co-taught a course centered on Indigenous water stories. The class drew about 20 students, a sizable number for the program, and quickly revealed something unexpected.

"When we brought ourselves together, we realized we were doing really cool work," Caughman recalls.

The course blended scientific inquiry with storytelling. Students examined water not only as a resource, but as a relative, a memory, a point of connection. Assignments ranged from analyzing policy to writing personal narratives, often culminating in op-eds intended for public audiences rather than academic journals.

For many students, it was their first time experiencing a classroom that validated both data and lived experience.

"They hadn't had a class where sciences and stories lived together," Caughman said. "Where they could explore the stories of their families and the places they come from."

Clark saw the same transformation from his side of the room.

"Each story was like layering complexity," he said. "You start to see a fuller picture of what water means, not just scientifically, but socially, culturally, historically."

That layered understanding is something students say they feel firsthand. Ellerie Black, a third-year biomedical sciences student at ASU, said the experience opened up a new way of thinking about research and community.

"I like the connection and relationality with everyone," said Black, who is Diné. "There are so many connections and also differences that help us all connect to something essential like water."

For Tallia Robledo, a fourth-year social work student, the experience was both academic and deeply personal.

“I was honestly disconnected from water,” said Robledo, an enrolled member of the Colorado River Indian Tribe. “I had heard about it, read about it, but I couldn’t grasp it academically or personally.”

Through the Relate Lab, that changed. Participating in interviews and community-based research, she began to see how others shared that same disconnection.

“Listening to everyone’s stories, people my age or younger, who also felt disconnected, that’s what opened my eyes,” Robledo said.

Now, she plans to take that knowledge back to her community, focusing on youth education and cultural reconnection.

“I want to go back and see what’s missing, especially for kids,” Robledo said.

Centering Indigenous perspectives

That sense of return, of knowledge flowing back into community, is central to the lab’s philosophy.

Marrilyn Galvan, who works with an Indigenous nonprofit, encountered the Relate Lab through a water cohort and was immediately drawn to its approach.

“I like that they’re focused on the relationship with water between tribes and communities,” Galvan said. “They’re building a community like water does with us.”

Galvan, an enrolled member of the Gila River Indian Community, said the lab’s emphasis on Indigenous perspectives is particularly important to her.

“They’re moving toward an Indigenous point of view, instead of just a Western one,” she said. “That’s very important, especially in a university setting.”

That shift is not just philosophical. It changes how research is conducted, who participates and what outcomes matter.

One of the lab’s most visible contributions is [River Bot](#), a form of what Caughman calls “relational AI.” The tool allows users to interact with an artificial intelligence that speaks as a river, blending ecological knowledge with a relational, narrative-driven perspective.

The project emerged after a year of failed attempts to adapt an existing water chatbot for Indigenous communities as part of the broader [WaterSIMersive initiative](#). The breakthrough came when Caughman proposed a simple but radical shift in thinking.

What if the system was not treated as a database, but as a being?

The result was immediate. The responses became more accurate, more meaningful and more resonant with community experiences. The tool is now being tested in tribal communities and educational settings, where users can ask both technical and philosophical questions about water.

For the lab, it represents something larger than a successful project or [academic paper](#). It suggests that even advanced technologies can be reshaped through relational thinking.

That same philosophy extends into partnerships across the Valley.

At the [Children's Museum of Phoenix](#), education programs manager Mac McGinnis has worked with the Relate Lab to create an exhibit where children write letters to water.

"It gets people to think about water in a more meaningful way," McGinnis said. "They're not just learning about it. They're engaging with it."

Children draw pictures, write messages and attach them to globe installations, creating a growing archive of reflections. Some are simple. Others are unexpectedly profound.

"It creates conversation," McGinnis said. "That's something missing in a lot of programming."

Clark sees the lab as part of a broader shift within academia, one that has been decades in the making.

There is now greater recognition of Indigenous knowledge systems, he says, but that recognition rests on years of work by scholars who fought to have those perspectives taken seriously.

The Relate Lab builds on that foundation while pushing it forward, blending disciplines, centering community and embracing storytelling as a form of knowledge.

Back in the Walton Center, the session begins to wind down. Conversations linger. Some participants exchange contact information. Others sit quietly, reflecting on what they have heard.

Caughman watches it all with a sense of purpose.

"I can't help but do relational work," she says. "It's who I am."

This story originally appeared on [ASU News](#).

Main image



Assistant Professor Liliana Caughman (second from left), co-director of ASU's Relate Lab, leads a session at the Walton Center for Planetary Health on ASU's Tempe campus. She and a dozen in-person lab participants, along with several more online, work together in a community-centered space dedicated to nontraditional, pro-Indigenous research, storytelling and sciences. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

Text image(s)



Assistant Professor Liliana Caughman, co-director of ASU's Relate Lab, leads a session on water and our relationship to it at the Walton Center for Planetary Health. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News

If You Could Talk To Water What Would You Say?

Leave A Note With Your Answer

My eyes
are blessed.
Water is
Life

Water makes
the Garden
GROW

Thanks
for
powers

Water
is
power

NEVER
DRY!

thank
you
for every
thing

are

How long I'm Glad
was water we have
Here for you

-Priscilla
Allen

Such an honor
to live with
you, the life
giver!

fish?

Charles Amey

Do you
KNOW
NEMO?

Thank
you

GET

Please
stay!!

you
da goat
water!

Thank
you!!!

Brainstorming from a Relate Lab exercise. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News



Community partner Mac McGinnis (second from right) talks with School of Human Evolution and Social Change graduate student Daniel Malone (far right) during a Relate Lab session on April 8. Photo by Charlie Leight/ASU News