

RESPONDING TO THE CALLS TO ACTION: INDIGENIZING A GRADUATE PROGRAM

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In this article, we present our work on Indigenizing pedagogy as a response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) Calls to Action. While Indigenous scholars provide access to the written voices of First Peoples (Battiste, 2013; Donald, 2009; Smith, 2012), the graduate program we created around the topic of reconciliation intentionally invited in Elders and allies to teach and learn alongside students. Our research reveals that inclusion of knowledge keepers, a respectful learning environment, along with creative pedagogical approaches, fostered transformative learning; yet we argue these innovations were only possible because our visions were supported by allied leadership.

Keywords: Indigenous education; reconciliation; reconciliatory pedagogy

RECONCILIATION: A SHARED RESPONSIBILITY

As Indigenous educators and allies, we have responded to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) (2015) *Calls to Action* with the Indigenization of a new graduate program focused on realizing reconciliation. A move to Indigenization has strengthened in recent years, led by Indigenous scholars and frontrunners who bring a variety of perspectives and responses to their readers (Alfred, 1999; Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2004). These efforts are further strengthened by the involvement of allies committed to making positive change in the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples (Association of Canadian Deans of Education,

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2010; Regan, 2010). We see reconciliation, where dark truths are brought to light, as a place where difficult conversations in safe places are requisite to moving forward (St. Denis, 2007). Chief Justice Murray Sinclair, in his work for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, spent countless hours with Indian Residential School survivors and singled out education as key to moving forward with the work of reconciliation:

Education is what got us into this mess—the use of education at least in terms of residential schools—but education is the key to reconciliation . . . That's why we say that this is not an aboriginal [sic] problem. It's a Canadian problem. (Watters, 2015, para. 17-18)

While the TRC *Calls to Action* extend across diverse realms, including the legal system, media, museums, and other public sites, it is the role of education that stands out in this important work. For many educators, the reticence to engage in Indigenous perspectives is not due to a lack of caring; rather, it stems from an uneasiness, or fear of not knowing how to undertake this work in a respectful manner. Having learned some of the atrocities that are hallmarks of Indigenous education, including residential schooling, educators are understandably anxious about not recreating the injustices of the past. As Paulette Regan (2010) describes it, “settlers may respond to [this] injustice with empathy, but lacking strategies for taking personal and political action, they simply intellectualize and compartmentalize their newfound knowledge and do nothing” (pp. 64-65). For the Indigenous and non-Indigenous students who signed up for the inaugural year of our graduate course, further inaction was not an option. Our students committed to making a genuine difference by designing critical service-learning responses to the TRC’s calls to action.

A CALL TO ACTION: IMAGINING A WAY TOWARDS RECONCILING

In 2015, the authors were encouraged by faculty leadership to design a graduate program grounded in Indigenous perspectives. We were drawn to the emerging work of reconciliation through

education as a powerful way to address some of the injustices of Canada's historical past. Understanding the potential inherent in this focus, our task was to create a respectful learning environment to empower learners with theories, stories, deep dialogue, creative works, ceremony, and a strong sense of community as a way to inspire and mobilize their reconciliatory intent. We also recognized that, without a clear pedagogical model of reconciliation to follow, we would need to create a program design based on our lived experiences and our knowledge of the literature that spoke to us about possibilities (see Figure 1 below).



Figure 1: Indigenous education: A call to action program (Werklund School of Education)

In designing this program, each author brought varied professional backgrounds working in Indigenous communities to the task, yet we were united by a shared vision of realizing reconciliation. In our various roles, we had each experienced the difficulties and challenges of bringing Indigenous truths to educators and, in our more successful moments, we had similarly shared in the triumph of transformative learning (Mezirow, 2000). We understood that studying the impact of this program on its inaugural cohort would help improve subsequent course offerings, and that the feedback and stories might help inspire others to take up their own reconciliatory actions. To gather insights into how we might achieve momentum around this type of work, we designed a research study that solicited feedback from all participants: the graduate students, who took part in a World Café event; the knowledge keepers, who were individually interviewed; and the instructors, who provided reflective feedback through journal entries. The authors were instructors in three of the four program courses.

In designing our program, we intentionally included a mix of readings, resources, and presentations by Indigenous scholars and non-Indigenous allies to ensure a balanced representation of voices. Our readings represented the range of responses to reconciliation: empowerment through reclamation of Indigenous knowledge (Smith, 2012); political agency (Battiste, 2013); community and adult education initiatives (Burton & Point, 2006); imagining decolonizing responses (Donald, 2009); resistance through humour (King, 2012); anger (Loft, 2012); and, importantly, aesthetic responses (Robinson & Martin, 2016). Students reported these readings as intense yet essential. We supplemented these scholarly explorations with the spoken word through the sharing of stories, podcasts, and short videos in order to expand our learners' vocabulary beyond the print tradition to a more creative and affective domain of learning. As one example, we devoted an entire afternoon to a screening of digital stories from a northern Alberta community so students could experience contemporary lived experiences from a Métis settlement perspective. We incorporated field trips, one to a nearby First Nations community to experience the power of place, ceremony, and land-based traditions, and another to a downtown art gallery that featured contemporary Indigenous artists. These off-campus experiences allowed students to experience "personal connections to the land [and gain] opportunities to explore self through art and creativity" (World Café response, July 2016).

In creating course assignments, we were similarly purposeful: we asked students to work collaboratively, creatively, and courageously as a way of imagining, experiencing, and understanding reconciliation (Donald, 2009; Robinson & Martin, 2016). In response, students composed an original "decolonizing ditty" based on a required course reading which was then performed in front of our class with a live grand piano accompaniment. Having both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators leading the program brought a sense of the interplay between theory

and action, Indigenous and settler, decolonization and Indigenization. Finally, we intentionally included the design and delivery of a critical service-learning project into their final two courses as a way of transforming from theory into the realm of praxis, where social change is possible.

Importantly, our work in Indigenous education has proven to us the potential of aesthetic approaches to open up conversations and individual reflections on how individuals might envision their own role in reconciliation. As Robinson and Martin (2016) remind us, the arts “unsettle us, provoke us, and make us reconsider our assumptions” (p. 3). Fittingly, the students revealed that they were given “multimodal opportunities for self-reflection inspired by learning” (World Café collective response, July 2016). Moreover, students maintained that they were provided with a “variety of perspectives [in] an attempt to understand each other, *even when uncomfortable and/or fearful*” (World Café response, July 2016, emphasis added). In taking up this difficult work, we recognize our roles and our responsibilities in enacting transformative learning for future educators and other leaders who, in turn, will positively impact future generations.

DECOLONIZING, MOVING TOWARDS INDIGENIZING

By insisting on the need to work as a collective on the design of our graduate program, we were rooting ourselves in Indigenous principles wherein the goals of decolonizing (Smith, 2012) and reconciling (Regan, 2010; TRC, 2015a) were far more likely to be realized. Aligning with critical theory, we understand decolonization as locating and dismantling the structures of colonialism that perpetuate inequities against Indigenous peoples. We also see decolonization as a shared and relational undertaking with settler peoples (Bishop, 2008; Regan, 2010). We learn from Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) that “[c]oming to know the past has been part of the critical pedagogy of decolonization” (p. 36). Yet, we are also cognizant that coming to know must purposefully transition to praxis, or *learning to do*, if we are to inspire an active response to

reconciliation. As we see it, reconciliation is best realized through those willing to respond in intentional and respectful ways, where even “small, symbolic, and everyday actions” (Robinson & Martin, 2016, p. 2) can be reconciliatory. Intrinsically, we see reconciliation in First Peoples and allies working *together* while respecting our differences.

Indigenous educators are deeply implicated in this work as a result of lived experiences and the ongoing challenges faced by our communities. These realities regularly remind us of our ethical responsibility to leverage our education to serve those in need. In *Moving Forward, Giving Back*, Indigenous advocate Larry Morrissette (2013) speaks to this responsibility in his professional role as a “change agent” working with those on the north side of Winnipeg, where “Aboriginal cultures and values have much to teach about building communities of sharing and cooperation and equality” (p. 41). In articulating our own roles in reconciliation, we remind readers that the work of reconciliation is a shared responsibility amongst Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples.

Significantly, moving from decolonizing towards Indigenizing requires us to learn alongside Indigenous knowledge keepers, and particularly to honour local Indigenous places and voices. To this end, we acknowledged the territory where our learning took place by inviting Blackfoot Elder Casey Eagle Speaker to open our learning space with a traditional prayer. Our two program Elders, or knowledge keepers, who taught and learned alongside our students for the duration of the 10-day summer program, gifted our host Elder with tobacco as a sign of respect in keeping with local cultural protocol. The extent of involvement of these respected knowledge keepers was the greatest innovation in our program, and students noted the “intentional authentic Indigenous delivery” (World Café collective response, July 2016) as meeting their learning needs. Miss Betty, a *Kehteyak* from northern Alberta, relayed an important recognition: “they [the University] finally know what it’s about” (Letendre, personal communication, August 30, 2016).

Similarly, instructor reflections revealed that the support of university leadership was requisite to fostering our collective orientation and the respectful integration of knowledge keepers within our program. With faculty leadership supporting our program vision, we were able to come together as a group of Indigenous educators and allies to create an innovative and change-enabling graduate program—a place where we “faced our history together in spaces where we could be vulnerable” (World Café collective response, July 2016).

MOVING FORWARD

As program instructors, we have relied on our lived experiences, our academic expertise, and a range of Indigenous knowledge traditions to guide us. Our research on the program’s first cohort reveals that our students recognized and valued our pedagogical intentions as they affirmed the inclusion of knowledge keepers and place-based learning as integral and authentic. Given the relational aspect of reconciliation, the essential role of dialogue in strengthening relationships was another key finding from our study. Our students are true innovators in the work of reconciliation, imagining and creating reconciliatory actions where there was no path to follow.

Finally, our emerging vision of reconciliatory pedagogy relies on the support of university leadership in Indigenizing education. The ongoing involvement of knowledge keepers throughout the summer program was made possible only because of senior faculty leadership honouring the lived experiences of Indigenous community knowledge keepers. If the academy is to be Indigenized, we will need all strengths gathered together around this work.

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