

We Pass the Talking Stick to You: Forming Alliances and Identities in the Academy

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Through the methodology of storytelling, this article discusses both the challenges and successes of bringing Indigenous Knowledges into an anti-oppressive school of social work. All the writers reject the status quo of presenting primarily Eurocentric world views in the academy and provide resistance strategies to ensure space for Indigenous Knowledges. The Aboriginal authors share personal stories—and the emotions arising from these—to highlight how their identities have been shaped and strengthened by their experiences in the academy. They also emphasize the importance of forming alliances among one another and with the local Aboriginal community around them and the administrators in their school in order to further the goal of bringing Indigenous knowledge systems into a university setting. The non-Aboriginal student who contributes to this article brings to our attention the importance of learning about the history of colonization, strengths of Aboriginal world views, and forming of alliances with Aboriginal communities for all educators and students. The article concludes with several successful strategies that have been implemented in this particular school of social work and recommendations that could be followed by all programs of study at all levels of education.

Introduction

In this article we explore some of the experiences of Aboriginal educators and students over the past few years in the School of Social Work at Ryerson University in Toronto. We five are in agreement that despite the challenges each of us faces, this is a school committed to the ongoing work of including Aboriginal perspectives throughout its curriculum and facilitating greater access to the program by Aboriginal students. In turn each of us—two educators, one Master of Social Work student, and two Bachelor of Social Work students—has a space to give voice to our struggles, successes, and recommendations in the School that they believe can be of value to any academic program.

In this article the educators discuss how we have approached our roles as teachers, researchers, mentors, and colleagues in the academy. We highlight the importance of building relationships with colleagues and students, the value of community support in bringing Aboriginal world views into the university, strategic forms of resistance that lead to concrete

actions, how the personal is political for us, and the rewards of educating students to become allies to one another.

The students who contribute to this article raise significant concerns and suggestions that are of value to all universities that wish to incorporate Aboriginal content into their programs. We relate stories of marginalization in our education, how having Aboriginal instructors and content in some of our courses strengthens us to challenge those that do not, the importance of learning about the history of colonization in order to create a more just future, and how education can be part of one's healing journey.

Five voices tell their diverse stories, which nevertheless contain a common theme: how the academy can be a space where alliances between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples are developed and identities shaped and strengthened. According to the authors of this article, such alliances are formed through education when the lived experiences of Aboriginal students are validated through the teaching of Aboriginal world views and history and when non-Aboriginal students are engaged in consciousness-raising as a result of these teachings. As well, the identities of the five authors have been shaped and strengthened by their time spent in the academy thus far. Their teaching and learning has taught them to rethink who they are: their strengths, values, the meanings of their experiences, and their roles in education.

We tend to use the term *Aboriginal* throughout this article as a way of being inclusive of all of the descendants of Turtle Island's (North America's) original peoples: all Nations, status and non-status, Métis and Inuit.

As you read this article, try to picture yourself sitting in a circle with the five of us. One by one, as each of us holds a talking stick, we have a turn to speak uninterrupted. Talking sticks are used in this manner by many Aboriginal Nations across Canada to signify that whoever is speaking is to be listened to without interruption or questioning. When one person is finished speaking, she or he passes the talking stick to the person next to him or her, who then has a turn to speak, and so on until everyone in the circle has spoken.

In order to signify who is writing, the author's name with a brief biography appears each time a voice changes.

Cyndy Baskin

Cyndy, who is of Mi'kmaq and Irish descent, has been a faculty member in the School of Social Work at Ryerson University since 2001. Her teaching emphasis is on bringing Aboriginal world views into social work education, and her research interests include, for example, structural determinants of health, education, and child welfare, all in relation to Indigenous peoples. Before entering the academy, Cyndy worked for 20 years as a helper/social worker in Aboriginal communities.

Cyndy: Relationships, Dialogue, and Pedagogy

I was practicing social work long before I earned any educational degrees, and my foundation of being a helper was always built first on relationships. What I consider a failure on the part of social work education to be inclusive of Aboriginal world views and approaches—even though we are overrepresented as service users in the field—and a belief that I must have something of value to share with others after all those years of direct practice, led me to become an educator. I write about some of my experiences as an educator in social work education that focus on relationships, dialogue, and pedagogy.

I believed that entering the academy as a professor of social work would provide me with the opportunity to resist current forms of colonization from within. This position made sense to me because historically the profession of social work has been oppressive of Aboriginal peoples (Bellefeuille & Ricks, 2003; Fournier & Crey, 1997; Gough, Trocme, Brown, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2003; Graveline, 1998; Hart, 2002; Kline, 1992; Margolin, 1997; Strong-Boag, 2002; Weaver, 2000), and today in fact both the academy and the profession often maintain the injustice and oppression of Aboriginal peoples. I hoped to make a contribution to knowledge-building and practice in the area of social work as a way of countering this oppression. I began believing that educators and administrators in the School of Social Work at Ryerson were seeking to make change based on anti-oppressive theory and practice, which is the rhetoric of schools of social work these days, and intended to include Aboriginal content in their curricula. With this in mind, I approached the notion of positive change by beginning locally in the School based on building relationships. Positive change needs to be framed in a discourse of relationship and dialogue, for as Aboriginal educator Patricia Monture-Angus (2003) writes, “what the teachings of my culture focus on is creating and maintaining relationships” (p. 43). In Aboriginal world views, the notion of relatedness is one of the primary values. Relationships are reciprocal, whether they be in families and communities or in classrooms: each gives and each receives.

Connected to the notion of relationship is dialogue, a process whereby new meanings and multiple ways of understanding arise and are constructed. Irving and Young (2002), in an article about the work of cultural theorist and philosopher Mikhail Bakhtin, write that “knowledge and the multiple truths of life are relational rather than representational” (p. 24). Knowledge is given in the context of a relationship or as Indigenous Hawaiian academic Leilani Holmes (2000) writes, it is “contextualized through relationships” (p. 40). The passing on of knowledge occurs in relationships of, for example, Elder and youth or teacher and student. Relationships are based on “reciprocity, obligation, shared experiences,

coexistence, cooperation and social memory" (Moreton-Robinson, 2000, p. 16).

Because I had witnessed other Aboriginal educators and students struggling with issues of assimilation, I recognized that the isolation, the whiteness, and lack of Aboriginal peoples in the academy would be challenging for me. There is an individualistic culture in the academy that contradicts Aboriginal world views that focus on the collective. Because I foresaw these challenges, immediately after being hired as a faculty member, I organized a support circle, or Aboriginal Advisory Committee as it is called, made up of Aboriginal social work practitioners, students, educators, and Elders, with most of whom I had already established relationships. This Committee has helped me enormously, and it is always one of my strongest suggestions to schools that are considering bringing Aboriginal peoples into the academy as educators and students.

As you can see, my resistance lies in speaking to others about my experiences in the academy and continuing to write about them. But I agree with bell hooks (1989) who writes, "simply naming and identifying a problem does not solve it; naming is only one stage in the process of transformation" (p. 70). I want to be able to come up with ongoing strategies that lead to concrete actions, which are once again focused on relationships and dialogue.

In teaching about colonization and Aboriginal world views in social work education, I try to give students an experience also grounded in relationships. An experience based on storytelling, both the stories of Aboriginal peoples and of the students; of traveling on an inward journey to examine questions such as *who am I?* and *what do I believe in?* of physically bringing community into the classroom; and opening the doorways to spirituality in both social work education and practice. This experience is not just of the mind, but of the heart and spirit as well.

As an educator, this is both challenging and rewarding for me. It is challenging because when I teach about colonization—residential schools, child welfare, abuse, and suicide—I am talking about myself, my family, and my community. It is rewarding because Aboriginal students are validated by hearing about colonization and their world views in a classroom often for the first time, and because non-Aboriginal students are hearing the truth about the history of Canada and the value of Aboriginal world views probably for the first time. To me these are steps toward understanding, healing, and building relationships based on alliances. Many students agree, as evidenced by a student survey conducted in 2004 wherein most of them believed that there needed to be a mandatory social work course on the history of colonization and Aboriginal ways of helping in the school's curriculum.

Another significant form of support comes with the relationships and dialogue I have with a handful of colleagues in my school. These relation-

ships have formed over my years there through some of us coming together to talk. At times someone would share concerns with me and ask if I related to any of those concerns. Other times they told me about themselves and I reciprocated. I was invited to participate in dialogue about possible solutions to concerns. I was invited to lunch. We visited in one another's offices and homes. I felt their genuine interest and respect even when I disagreed with one or more of them. I heard them disagree with me and challenge my positions on issues. With the support, validation, and solidarity of this small group, I am able to be who I am in the academy with others rather than being alone.

Building relationships is also critical in the area of research with Aboriginal peoples and communities. Often the research group is somewhat like an extended family. Members spend time together to get to know each other, they make decisions based on consensus, each supports the other, everyone's input is respected, and hospitality is an expected norm. In this "collective action way of making knowledge, emotional bonding with particular others is what generates new insights and knowledge. Knowledge here is not separated from emotion" (Apffel-Marglin, 1998, p. 20). This Aboriginal approach to research, however, tends to be problematic for the universities where I teach and have conducted research. When I offer tobacco—which is necessary according to the cultural protocols of many Aboriginal Nations—to research participants, I am contributing to a health hazard. When I provide food and gifts, I am bribing research participants. When I write about the research group as something like a family and that there is bonding and emotion involved in gathering information, my objectivity is questioned. When I want to thank research participants by name in my reports and publications—with their agreement of course—I am breaching confidentiality.

Another tricky area for me as an educator is the principle of academic freedom, in which the academy prides itself. One would think that such freedom would include the acceptance of diversity of ideologies and world views. My concern, however, is that freedom in the academy can in fact mask assimilation. One can be "free" as long as one is willing to conform to the status quo on matters of importance such as types of assignments on which students will be graded or the kinds of materials they will be required to read in one's department. We Aboriginal peoples know intimately the deal with assimilation. In the academy this at times means *join us, but be quiet and with your silence comes your approval, so we can be proud that we have Aboriginal representation within our School and are therefore doing the right thing*. Being ever mindful and guarding against this masked assimilation is my greatest caution to those in the academy when they decide to bring in Aboriginal educators and content into their curricula.

Contained in the academy's challenges, however, are many opportunities for both teaching and learning, not only for my colleagues and the students who attend our courses, but also for myself. These opportunities inevitably continue to present themselves to me mostly through relationships.

Ruth Koleszar-Green, BSW, MSW candidate

Ruth identifies as a Mohawk woman with Celtic ancestry. She has a Bachelor of Social Work degree from Ryerson University and is currently attending this School to attain her master's degree. She has learned to be comfortable with her tears.

Ruth: Emotion is Not Far Below the Surface

For me to be sitting here, to be asked to speak, and to have a voice is emotional. I did not think that I would be a social worker. I did not think that I would have a university degree, let alone be working on a second. I did not come to social work to fight for my people. I came because I could no longer do my previous work. I thought that private practice with wealthy clients would be a smart career move.

I have always been Aboriginal as it is not something you wake up one morning and are. However, I did wake up one morning and decide that I was not going to hide being Aboriginal any more. I decided that I was going to be the strong Mohawk woman that my grandmothers and grandfathers knew I would be. In being that strong woman, I have found that my emotions are not far below the surface of my being. I have also found that I am not the only Aboriginal person to experience this.

In the academy I have had to struggle like all Aboriginal peoples before me and all the Aboriginal peoples who will come after me. I am honored to have the opportunity to sit with strong Aboriginal women who have eased the struggle for those of us that are following them. Both of these women (Ruth waves her hand lovingly in Cyndy's and Lynn's directions) have been my teachers—in the academy as professors, but more important, as aunties and mentors.

I have had the benefit of these women's strength and love to be open and honest about who I am and the struggles that I am currently facing and have been through. Monture-Angus (1995) discusses the pain and emotion of being an Aboriginal woman in academia. This too is my reality, yet I have been lucky to have other Aboriginal women to go to when everything felt hard and racist. I have had a safe place to express my emotions and shed my tears, which has happened on many occasions.

In my second year of studies, where students were presented with five theories of social work to explore (none of which were from an Aboriginal perspective), I asked to write my theory paper on Aboriginal world views. I was told that I could not write it on Aboriginal world views because I was not in an Aboriginal program, but that I could if I wished take a

one-semester elective the following year on Aboriginal social work. I was not sure what to do; here a professor was telling me that I could not be me. I could not study and write on what made sense to me. I had to conform to the mainstream ideology of what was considered a *social work theory*.

I tell this story not to tarnish or scold the School of Social Work at Ryerson, but to highlight the struggles that can still go on in an anti-oppressive school that has infused some Aboriginal content into its courses. In this moment I learned that I and other Aboriginal people in academia would be trudging an uphill road and that through this I would have to find a way to protect my emotions. But I am also learning "that finding peace doesn't necessarily come from the head—it comes from the heart" (Pitawanakwat, 2006, pp. 8-9) and that my emotions are a valid means of learning. I wish that I could turn to my professor from my second year of studies now and explain to her that as an Aboriginal student in a mainstream program, I know that I will have to learn all the words to label a person and his or her problems from a non-Aboriginal perspective. I will also have to learn a second framework of being a helper. In this second set of learning I will see "that the only true knowledge that I can have is that which is learned from what I experienced" (Monture-Angus, 1995, p. 45).

Well, the next year, I did take that one-semester elective course on Aboriginal social work, which is called *Ogitchita Lu Wu Ti Li Hu Nyu Nih* (Anishnawbe and Oneida for "Strong Helpers' Teachings"). It was wonderful. It was fulfilling. It was the class that made the most sense to me. The readings were based on various people's *stories* and not on peer-reviewed academic journal articles. It was based on experiential learning and an Aboriginal approach to understanding the world. An example of this form of learning was the major written assignment, which was based on the student's personal reflexivity and interactions with the readings. Many of my classmates struggled to understand what was expected of them for this written assignment. They could not grasp that their own stories and understandings were where they could learn the most. We were also required to "participate" for a portion of our grade. This is common in all social work courses; however, in this class, participation was about more than just showing up, it was about working with others to ensure that the class was set up in a circle rather than in a typical lecture style with the desks in rows; it was helping others in the class to ensure that we succeeded as a group and that no one was left behind; and it was about making sure that those who required extra help for whatever reason found the support that they required.

Ogitchita is a rare class that could be used in all schools of social work. And since I attended this class, it has been made mandatory for all second-year social work students at Ryerson. It is called Aboriginal Approaches to Social Work and the *Ogitchita* elective is now a new course that builds on the mandatory class. This class will also play an important role in my

master's major research paper. I want to talk to the Aboriginal students who have sat in that mandatory class and understand their physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental responses to this class and our ways of learning.

I recently convoked with my Bachelor of Social Work degree, and when Dr. Baskin called my name to cross the stage and be hooded by the Coordinator of Ryerson's Aboriginal Student Services Monica McKay, I heard the pride but knew that it was also expected, that she would say "with honors." I know that in a university setting *with honors* means that I received good grades. For me though, to have my auntie say that I have earned my degree with honor means that I have done the best that I can do for myself as an individual, for my family, for my community, for my Nation, and for all of Creation. I have learned in this academic language how to be an anti-oppressive social worker, but I have also learned to be a strong helper. And I did both with honor.

Now, while working on my master's degree, I am challenging all my professors to include, rather than exclude, Aboriginal world views in all courses. Within the first week of classes, I was questioned by another student as to whether I thought that I was an expert on Aboriginal world views when I asked a non-White, non-Aboriginal professor why there was no student-led discussion on the Aboriginal authors' work included in the course. The readings in the course were a way for students to understand and connect the historical implications of assimilation with the current struggles of Aboriginal peoples, communities, and Nations.

I have struggled with a constant need to fight for an Aboriginal voice in classes. The struggle comes from feeling as if I may be labeled the *Angry Indian* who is forever fighting to have her voice heard; the angry person who is always bringing up the historical oppression of her people. This label is demeaning, as it assumes that there is no reason for the Aboriginal peoples of this country to be angry and that the Angry Indian is just a continual complainer or agitator. However, I know that I have a right to be angry. If one of my professors or classmates decides to label me the Angry Indian either in their head or in conversations, it is for them to own that label and not me. I am refusing to pick up their shame and pain. I am standing on my strong Mohawk feet with all the pride that my grandmothers and grandfathers know I have.

As I continue in my education, my aunties and mentors encourage and remind me that I am strong enough to continue on to the doctoral level. I know that this is where I would like to see my educational path travel. I know that I am hoping to be a professor like my aunties. I also know that there will be many more tears for me to shed, because for me, like many Aboriginal people, my emotions are not far beneath the surface.

Jessica Hendry

Jessica is a fourth-year Bachelor of Social Work student at Ryerson University. As a non-Aboriginal woman, Jessica is interested in learning about Aboriginal communities and the struggles that Aboriginal peoples have been forced to deal with since colonization began.

Jessica: Building Alliances with Aboriginal Communities

Before beginning university, I believed that I had quite a good grasp of troubling societal issues such as poverty, racism, sexism, and so forth. However, when I began the social work program at Ryerson, I realized that this was not true. I had no idea how bad certain issues really were. This notion was particularly true when it came to Aboriginal communities and the struggles they have faced for hundreds of years.

In my second year of the social work undergraduate program, it was mandatory to take a course on anti-oppression, as Ryerson teaches from an anti-oppressive framework. One semester of this full-year course was focused strictly on Aboriginal issues. It was called *Aboriginal Approaches to Social Work*. Cyndy Baskin was my professor for this class, and I can honestly say that I learned more in this one semester than I had my entire first year of university. Not only did I learn about Aboriginal communities and the issues that they face, I also learned a lot about myself.

I am ashamed to admit it, but I had no clue what a residential school was before taking this course. I had no idea that Aboriginal youth suicide was five times higher than that of the general youth population in Canada (Chandler, Lalonde, Sokol, & Hallett, 2003) before taking the course or that Aboriginal people suffered from a range of health problems at higher rates than the general Canadian population (Kirmayer, Gregory, & Tait, 2000).

I enjoyed the class tremendously. I was excited that we had a strong, inspiring, Aboriginal woman sitting in the class circle with the students and teaching us about Aboriginal history before and after contact with European society, about Aboriginal world views, and the many strengths of all the diverse Nations across North America. Most courses in history are taught by white men or women who talk only about the "winners" of the war or the good that "their people" have done for our country. We never hear the other side of the story except for the one chapter at the end of the history textbook on *Native Canadians*.

Even as a child, the only thing I remember learning about Aboriginal peoples was in elementary school where we were taught that Indians used teepees and danced around the fire. I was never told the truth about what my people had done through colonization and all the damage that was caused to Aboriginal communities: damage that continues today.

In this course, students were given a presentation assignment. In groups we were to research and present on Aboriginal helping practices, teachings, and/or relevant societal issues. My group and I decided to do our presentation on Aboriginal practices in health and healing. We knew

that anyone could sit in front of a computer and research Aboriginal healing practices, so we decided to go to Anishnawbe Health Toronto to speak directly to an Aboriginal healer and/or Elder.

My group consisted of four unique individuals. One of our group members actually made a comment about the differences between us during our presentation to the class. There was a Trinidadian heterosexual woman in our group; an Italian heterosexual woman; a white lesbian or "two-spirited" woman; and myself, a white heterosexual woman. As a group embracing each other and our differences, we found this presentation quite powerful, and it gave us the chance really to get to know each other while learning about what was to us an entirely new world view.

Our group was prepared for meeting with some resistance from the agency, which might not be interested, or have time, to work with our group. However, a woman called Evanne took us under her wing and was more than willing to educate us on healing, traditional medicines, and the medicine wheel used in many Aboriginal cultures. After explaining about some of the many herbs used in Aboriginal healing, Evanne invited our group back the next week to learn how to smudge. This practice is used in several Aboriginal cultures to cleanse negativity and/or unkind feelings, thoughts, or actions from the body, mind, and spirit of the individual, group, or the physical location where they are gathered. In this practice, one of four sacred medicines are used; however, from what I have seen it is usually sage (Solomon, 2005).

Our group thoroughly enjoyed talking with and learning from Evanne. We took what we learned from her and an Elder at Anishnawbe Health and presented it to our class with the intention of educating our peers as well as sharing our personal experiences of building a relationship with Evanne and the feeling of being embraced by her.

Along with the presentation in the Aboriginal Approaches to Social Work class, students were asked to complete a paper on our social location and how aspects of it related to that of Aboriginal peoples. The assignment directed us to consider how aspects of our social location could create both barriers and connections in building relationships with Aboriginal peoples and becoming allies with them. This paper was a reflexive, rather than reflective, one that allowed students to examine the intersections of our social locations, to explore how intersectionality affects people's lives, and to apply these explorations directly to the work we might do in social work with Aboriginal peoples and to the area of social justice. The paper was both unique to my social work education and although very challenging, helpful as it gave me the opportunity to examine seriously where I fit into society, how my social location connects and affects the lives of others, and taught me never to forget on whose land I have the privilege of living.

I believe that education on colonization and its effects happens far too late in life, if at all, for most people. Aboriginal issues and the truth about Canadian history should be woven into education at all levels, beginning in elementary schools and continuing into postsecondary institutions.

I will never be an expert on Aboriginal issues; that would be impossible. I will never fully understand the effects of colonization, as I am not part of the Aboriginal population. However, I can try to build alliances, educate myself, and educate others about the issues that Aboriginal communities face today. I believe that education is the key to making others aware of and helping them to understand societal issues that they have not experienced. As well, education can aid in the building of alliances between individuals from varied groups in society.

Lynn Lavallée

Lynn, who is of Algonquin, Cree, and French descent, has been a faculty member in the School of Social Work at Ryerson University since 2005. Her research interests include Indigenous epistemology, research methods, and health. Her teaching emphasis relates to historic trauma and healing, and she teaches at both the graduate and undergraduate levels on topics such as Aboriginal epistemology and research.

Lynn: I Am My Thoughts and My Memories

As I hold this talking stick I begin by speaking about my identity. I begin speaking about identity because it is where the colonizers began their attempt to annihilate the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. Our Elders and traditional teachings tell us that we need to know where we have come from in order to know where we are going. Because of colonization, the understanding of my identity and my ancestors as with many Aboriginal peoples on Turtle Island is fluid. Today this is my understanding of my identity and ancestry.

I am recognized by the government as Métis although I struggle with this term because it symbolizes how colonization has left us with labels that do not reflect who we understand ourselves to be. The French translation for Métis is "half-breed" or "half-blood." Identity is not about blood quantum, but rather who you understand yourself to be. Many Métis have a blood quantum greater than those classified by the Indian Act as Status Indians (Turner Strong & Van Winkle, 1996). Métis are those that fall outside the legislated classification system. Métis and non-status Indians are the success stories for the colonizers in that we have been stripped of an inherent right to self-identify as Indigenous peoples.

I was born in Sudbury, Ontario. Both my parents passed on to the spirit world some time ago, but they still walk with me today. My father was Oscar Lavallée from Fabre, Quebec in Temiscaming. My mother was adopted although she was never aware of this. She was born in Timmins, Ontario. Her mother was Annonciade Labelle from Maniwaki, Quebec. I

am not certain of her father's heritage. However, the only grandfather I knew was my mother's stepfather, Norman Godon from Mariapolis, Manitoba (Swan Lake Reserve, Ojibwe).

In 2005 I joined the School of Social Work at Ryerson University. I had not yet finished my doctorate, which I was completing in the University of Toronto's Faculty of Social Work. I never thought I would be part of the social work profession, let alone be teaching in such a discipline. My area of research is broadly defined as the social determinants of health with a focus on Indigenous peoples. I had completed my master's degree in community health at the University of Toronto and felt that to gain a better understanding of social welfare, particularly in impoverished communities, I would gain a well-rounded understanding through attaining a doctorate in social work. However, I was apprehensive about becoming part of social work because of the struggles my family, friends, and community had experienced at the hands of social workers.

Historically, Aboriginal peoples in Canada have been affected by social work, most notably through the child welfare system where we still see a disproportionate degree of apprehensions of Aboriginal children compared with non-Aboriginal children (Trocme, Knoke, & Blackstock, 2004). I struggled throughout my doctorate and in teaching Aboriginal-related material in social work.

The greatest tension sitting in classes, learning the dominant Western theories of social work and hearing about the conventional way social work is practiced, triggered both past and current memories related to the subject matter being discussed. I recalled how social workers would visit our home and the fear that we would have about being taken away. My siblings and I witnessed neighbors and friends being apprehended, and this was a topic of conversation in our home. I also recalled how my mother was treated by social workers in the hospital before she passed on to the spirit world. She was admitted to hospital regularly for various reasons such as lack of oxygen, anxiety, and uncontrollable pain. Yet a social worker informed my sister that the hospital was not a babysitting service. From that point on, my mother decided she did not want to go to the hospital, and we attempted to care for her as best we could at home.

I would become angry in the classroom, particularly when what was being discussed contradicted my personal experiences. My anger would come out in the discussions. I could not remain silent. However, I was selective about what I disclosed about my personal experiences. At times my personal experiences became too overwhelming even to think about, let alone discuss in class. This left me unresponsive and unable to feel any emotion. My memories became paralyzing.

When I met an Elder for the first time, he asked, "Who are you?" As I did whenever anyone asked me this question, I became anxious. I felt my heart race and my voice quiver in attempting to answer his question. I told

him my name and said that I was doing my Ph.D. in the Faculty of Social Work. He again asked, "But who are you?" I grew increasingly anxious and said to him, "I don't know," and then asked him, "Who am I?" He answered, "You are your thoughts and your memories."

Who I am, my thoughts and my memories are interwoven in the social work classrooms I attended for my education. My unpleasant memories with the social work profession and with social work topics challenged me to persevere, and in April 2007 I successfully defended my thesis.

The challenge in bringing my identity into teaching in the social work field was different because I was teaching about Aboriginal ways of knowing and Aboriginal experiences. This was different because as Baskin (2006) notes, many Aboriginal students in social work-related fields have little exposure to Aboriginal content. My university classes did not include Aboriginal ways of knowing or Aboriginal world views, but now I was able to teach from this perspective. In my first and second years at Ryerson, I taught a mandatory course that focused on Aboriginal world views and ways of helping. In this course we discuss the colonization of Aboriginal peoples and the effects in the field of social work. My thoughts and memories became an integral part of my teaching. Rather than listening to dominant Western theories that did not apply to my experiences as an Aboriginal woman, I could share an Aboriginal world view.

The greatest challenge to integrating my identity and my experiences in the classroom was about what I should and should not disclose. I brought this question up with other Aboriginal social work educators, and the response I received was to share everything. I do not feel that I can share everything, but I share what I am comfortable with at this time. I believe that sharing our experiences as Aboriginal people offers students a direct application to what they are learning through readings and also brings a form of experiential learning into the classroom (Mainemelis, Boyatzis, & Kolb, 2002).

The second challenge of teaching about colonization and Aboriginal issues in social work relates to Cyndy's comment that as an educator, when teaching about colonization she is talking about herself, her family, and community. I joked that the outline for the mandatory course *Aboriginal Approaches to Social Work* should include a cautionary label for Aboriginal instructors: teaching this course could trigger unpleasant memories and may be damaging to your health. I did not realize the extent to which teaching about residential schools, the sixties scoop, the millennium scoop (Sinclair, 2007), intergenerational grief and historic trauma, rates of suicide, and morbidity and mortality would have on my emotions. It is hard to put into words what I mean other than to say, "I am my thoughts and my memories."

Currently I am teaching a master's-level course, and I find that as we discuss the effects today related to colonization, assimilation, and an-

nihilation of Aboriginal peoples and our cultures, I am again at a loss for words. However, this time it is not because of a feeling of being defeated. Rather I sit and listen to these students and recognize that they are truly gaining an understanding of what has happened and is currently happening to the Aboriginal peoples of Turtle Island. They are being armed with Aboriginal knowledges and our true history and will be the future allies for Aboriginal peoples. This is the most rewarding experience I have had throughout my 10 years of teaching in the university setting.

Jennifer Alicia Murrin

Jennifer identifies as a woman with Mi'kmaq and Irish ancestry. She is in her fourth year of attending Ryerson University to obtain a Bachelor of Social Work degree. She wishes to pursue a master's degree specializing in the area of Indigenous Knowledges in the future.

Jennifer: Self-Identity and Healing

When people look at me, they see my white skin, and while growing up in Newfoundland all I acknowledged was my white skin. I learned that my skin color gave me privilege and allowed me to fit in with the dominant group in society. I was "normal" just like everyone around me. I wanted so desperately to fit in and I managed to do that. The reality, however, was that I was carrying around internalized oppression (Alfred, 2004; Alladin, 1996; Gil, 1998; Mullaly, 2002). I was ignoring a part of my identity because I was ashamed of it. I did this because when I informed people about my ancestry, I received negative reactions. Some people would say, "But your skin is white, you can't be Native," and others said, "Oh, so you get free education and don't have to pay taxes, right?" I did not want to be seen as being part Native because I learned that being seen as such came with assumptions that I did not like (Gil; Mihsuah, 1996). After hearing enough negative reactions from people, I thought that there was no point saying that I was Aboriginal because it seemed as if it was not worth the explanation or the humiliation. For these reasons I made a conscious decision that I would keep my secret bottled up inside, which was easy to do because of my white skin and ability to fit in.

When I heard that I would be taking a mandatory course called Aboriginal Approaches to Social Work, strange feelings came over me. I felt scared, anxious, nervous, and excited all at the same time. Something was telling me that this course would affect me, and it did. The course helped me to open up the bottle that had been secured so tightly inside. It helped me create some harmony in my life because I began to learn that Aboriginal Knowledges are just as valid and important as any other knowledge in social work. I began to learn that textbooks and peer-reviewed journal articles are not the only source of knowledge (Lanigan, 1998). When I sat in the classroom I felt as if I was supposed to be there. I am so thankful that this course was mandatory because if I had not taken it, I do

not know if I would have ever begun my journey of uncovering who I really am. Maybe I would still be that girl with the white skin and a secret. Maybe I would still be lost. As Anne Bishop (2002) states, "Expressing one's emotions is healing and liberating" and I believe this to be true (p. 66). Healing is a journey, and mine began when I took this course.

Aboriginal Approaches to Social Work taught me that my situation of internalized oppression was due to something much bigger than me: it is about colonization. I am one of the results of colonization. It has left many people feeling just like me: confused, ashamed, and caught in between the cultures of white dominant society and those of Aboriginal peoples.

I believe that many people are ignorant about Aboriginal beliefs. Many of the social work students who come through this mandatory course in the School of Social Work at Ryerson truly believe the stereotypes about Aboriginal peoples (Alfred, 2004; Mihesuah, 1996). One of the most important teachings that the mandatory course provided was breaking these stereotypes. These stereotypes were deconstructed not only because of the content and knowledge that was shared in the classroom from the real stories of Aboriginal peoples, but also because an Aboriginal woman was teaching the course. I strongly believe that the information taught in this class should be taught to everyone much earlier than at the university level. Aboriginal representation and knowledges are lacking in all educational institutions from elementary schools to universities, as these institutions continue to be only Eurocentric in their teaching and content.

The School of Social Work at Ryerson University teaches students to analyze society critically. It focuses mainly on anti-oppression theory and practice. In most of the courses I have taken, there has been a small section on issues related to Aboriginal peoples. There will be an article or case study focusing on Aboriginal peoples, but not a whole class or entire lecture. Although these classes have taught me some knowledge, the mandatory course Aboriginal Approaches to Social Work opened my eyes. Lynn Lavallée, who was my instructor in this course, taught us to look beneath the surface. For example, she told us to look at fashion trends, the names of sports teams, commercials, the names of colleges, the language of the government, and the use of the word *Indian* in order to uncover the values, biases, and racism beneath all these components of society. This course told me that it is good to question things and even better to challenge them, which has in turn brought light into my life. The course brought out something from inside; it made me wake up.

Now that I openly identify my Mi'kmaq ancestry, I find that things have changed a little, but not always for the better. For example, sometimes in a class when a teacher is discussing Aboriginal issues, he or she may ask me to speak on behalf of Aboriginal peoples, which I cannot possibly do. I am still finding out about my identity, and to speak on behalf of every Aboriginal person would be absurd. I also find that be-

cause most of the time I am the only person in the class with Aboriginal ancestry, I speak up much more about Aboriginal issues. When this happens—as for many other Aboriginal students—I am labeled as an angry person. Yet I cannot help but speak up because I am often triggered by the racist assumptions and remarks from other students. You see, people in general tend to make derogatory statements about Aboriginal peoples with me in the room, or even to me, assuming that I am white.

Since my experiences from the Aboriginal Approaches to Social Work course, I have become more involved in finding out about my identity and learning about the struggles that are prevalent in Aboriginal communities today. This is not an easy journey, but I do not want it to be. Rather, I want to be challenged and hope that I am able to continue challenging others as this is what a good education ought to be.

Conclusion

Clearly being in the academy and writing about our experiences as educators and students has been an emotional journey for all of us. Each of us in our own way lives with the sadness and anger that often comes with the ongoing struggle of working to bring Indigenous knowledge systems into social work education. Our stories also reveal how educating and learning about social work with Aboriginal peoples also involves learning more about ourselves. We have all gained strength from the relationships that have been formed among Aboriginal educators and Aboriginal students; our identities and life experiences as diverse Aboriginal peoples have been validated; and we have witnessed how Aboriginal world views can have value to all learners in the field of social work.

Our greatest success as educators and students has been in forming alliances with members of Toronto's Aboriginal community and the school's administration to accomplish the following since 2001.

- Partnership with Ryerson University's Aboriginal Student Services;
- Professional development workshops for faculty on the history of colonization and Aboriginal world views;
- Partnership with First Nations Technical Institute to deliver the Bachelor of Social Work degree off-campus to Aboriginal students working in their communities;
- Ongoing Aboriginal instructors' forums and Aboriginal community consultations on curricula and student access and retention;
- Student and faculty survey on Aboriginal content in the curriculum;
- Partnership in the Aboriginal Advanced Practitioners Initiative to facilitate greater access and retention of Aboriginal students working in Aboriginal agencies in Toronto in the Schools of Social Work at Ryerson and University of Toronto;
- Hiring a second tenure-track Aboriginal faculty member;

- Mandatory undergraduate second-year course Aboriginal Approaches to Social Work;
- Elective undergraduate third/fourth year course *Ogitchita Lu Wa Ti Li Hu Nyu Nih* (Strong Helpers' Teachings);
- Infusion of some content on social work with Aboriginal peoples in all undergraduate and graduate courses;
- Two Master of Social Work elective courses Regenerating Aboriginal Social Work Practices and Research and Indigenous Knowledges in Social Work; and
- Two scholarships for graduate Aboriginal students in the inaugural year of the MSW program *Ogitchita Kwe* (Strong Woman Helper).

Our successes lead to recommendations for other schools of social work and indeed all programs. We encourage universities that aim to include Indigenous knowledge systems in their programming to invite community into their institutions to form Aboriginal advisory committees to work in partnership with educators and administrators to create true change. We ask educational institutions to be mindful of masked assimilation and critically self-reflect as to whether they want Aboriginal voices and representation in their universities or merely Aboriginal bodies. We suggest that higher education acknowledge Aboriginal world views as theories in their programs that are viewed as just as valid as any other theory. We urge universities to include a mandatory course on Aboriginal world views, the history of colonization, and current resistance in each of their programs of study and that they infuse this content throughout their curricula. Finally, we recommend to all who are involved in education at the elementary and high school levels to begin to do the same.

As academic warriors and allies privileged to be in the academy, we know that picking up the talking stick and speaking our truth is both our right and our responsibility. We now pass the talking stick to you.

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