

# Beyond Tokenism: Relational Learning and Reconciliation Within Post-secondary Classrooms and Institutions

*Elizabeth Cooper*

*University of the Fraser Valley*

*Rebecca Major*

*University of Saskatchewan*

*Emily K. Grafton*

*University of Regina*

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*Following the Truth and Reconciliation report and Calls to Action, there has been a concerted effort within Canada to Indigenize the academy. This effort is taking place within administration, research, and classroom settings, and with community partners across multiple disciplines. The application of these practices and policies often appears to be a token response rather than one achieving meaningful change. Through the use of focused auto-ethnography, we discuss our decolonizing pedagogical approach within post-secondary classrooms in health sciences, humanities, and social sciences with Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. We propose that relational learning can lead to reconciliatory actions in the classroom.*

**Keywords:** decolonization, relational Learning, engaged Learning, Indigenous education, reconciliation

## *Introduction*

It was 2013 and the authors were on social media lamenting another week-end spent indoors marking assignments. A private message was sent from one to another saying, in jest, "Do you want to mark my assignments? I'll mark yours next time." To which the reply, "I gave my students an assignment that involves the creation of a scrapbook to try to move beyond colonial academic discourse. Why don't you mark those and I'll mark the essays you had your students write? Marking essays without thinking about Indigenous pedagogy would probably be easier" was received. The first person responded, "I gave MY students a scrapbook assignment to get them to unpack colonial expectations about the concept of wellness within bio-medical healthcare." Thus began the first of many conversations about how, as academics, we can move beyond tokenism to a place of healing and change within both research and classroom settings.

As new instructors trained in decolonizing theory, we had few role models within the academy to guide us in actualizing these goals and found little scholarship discussing how institutions were attempting to address settler colonialism within curriculum. We also questioned the concept of *Indigenizing the academy*, and have relied strongly on one another to be sounding boards as we work to further the conversations within our own disciplinary and institutional settings. We have a shared belief that academic education needs to move beyond tokenism. Tokenism can be understood as symbolic gestures; these techniques might give the appearance of reconciliation in the classroom, but they are inauthentic and do little to create transformative change. Instead, they reinforce or maintain the status quo.

Within this paper we use a focused auto-ethnography approach to explore our understanding of reconciliation within the post-secondary classroom setting. We explore five key challenges and provide examples of how relational learning offers the opportunity to move beyond tokenism to create an authentic space for reconciliation within classroom settings.

### *Background*

Reconciliation and practices or ideas related to reconciliation in the discipline of Canadian education cannot be separated from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC). The TRC has defined reconciliation as a relationship built on mutual respect (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015b). In practice, the TRC demonstrated what this would look like at public hearings that were facilitated through a practice of survivor and intergenerational survivor *truth-telling* or sharing of their experiences, and the Canadian public's *bearing-witness* or listening to these truths. The TRC also equips all Canadians, settlers, newcomers, and Indigenous people alike, with 94 *Calls to Action* that are concrete ways to invoke and implement reconciliation in our lives (TRC, 2015c). The deep connection of education to reconciliation, as envisioned by the TRC, is based on several important aspects of the TRC. The TRC is an outcome of the *Indian Residential Schools Settlement Agreement*, which was led by survivors of the Indian Residential School system. The TRC is thus a response to a system of education developed and implemented by the Canadian government that was colonial, assimilative, and unjust in its treatment of Indigenous children, their families, and their communities. The final report of the TRC looks critically at how education, specifically the Indian Residential Schools system, was used as a colonial tool to disrupt Indigenous intergenerational knowledge systems and impose Eurocentric-based knowledge (assimilation) onto Indigenous children (Niezen, 2013; TRC,

2015b, 2016). Yet, the TRC also encourages Canadian society to critically engage with the injustices of colonialism through education to create spaces for reconciliation.

In many ways, the TRC created a groundswell of reconciliatory activity across Canada. Institutions that are deeply entrenched in Eurocentric worldviews are mobilizing around this shift, and making significant investments and commitments to meeting the *Calls to Action*. There are, however, many who are critical of the TRC and these efforts of reconciliation. Niezen (2013), for example, is critical of the TRC's lack of victim-based testimony and conviction of the perpetrators who carried out the abuses endured by Indigenous children at the Indian Residential Schools. On reconciliation, Garneau (2012) additionally argues that it is predominantly the responsibility of settler or non-Indigenous Canadians to take up the call for reconciliation as Indigenous peoples have already been conciliatory. The authors have come to understand their work, in a spirit of reconciliation, to involve settlers, newcomers, and Indigenous people. The conversation must be one of relational learning and should not result in positioning Indigenous people as the carriers of all knowledge pertaining to all issues, a place that many often find themselves, unfortunately. Part of the reconciliation process is ensuring that we do not perpetuate the same harms that have occurred (Blackstock, 2003); as such, we need to work together in a genuine manner rather than separately. We see authenticity in reconciliatory work as integral to avoiding tokenism. Tokenism in decolonizing education can be well-intentioned and include cultural practices and worldviews. Cultural programs alone do not address colonialism within the education system and will not transform educational institutions (Cote-Meek, 2014).

While the term *decolonization* has long been studied (Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2007; Fanon, 1963; Freire, 1970; Memmi, 1965), we would like to briefly discuss the intersection between decolonization and education. In simple terms, decolonization can be understood as the overcoming or undoing of colonialism in some way (though it is, of course, more complex than this). The intersection of education and decolonization has many facets to it. The content and structures of education can be steeped in colonial thinking. For example, teaching (or the process), the content of teaching (or curriculum), and decision-making (or governance and administration) tend to follow standards derived by Eurocentric epistemological theories and methods. Battiste (2013) coined the term *cognitive imperialism* to demonstrate how Canadian education perpetuates Eurocentric viewpoints through training the mind's thought processes to normalize and perpetuate colonialism.

Decolonizing education can include various approaches. It often centres on questioning tacit and explicit knowledge shared through education practices. It challenges us to reconsider the principles used to define an expert and to develop the content that is taught and methods for how information is disseminated. These concepts are not new. In 1972, the National Indian Brotherhood / Assembly of First Nations published *Indian Control of Indian Education* which advocated for control over education to be placed back into the hands of Indigenous Nations. Control over education can ensure that Indigenous ways of knowing are not lost to new generations of Indigenous peoples. Decolonized education can also benefit all Canadians, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, alike. As Deborah Young has said, "Education is the single most important tool we have to combat racism and discrimination and to advance reconciliation" (Shead, 2016). Some approaches might include bringing local Indigenous languages into mainstream education, having traditional Knowledge Keepers or Elders work within the school system, developing land-based and place-based learning, incorporating Indigenous culture into programs and programming, and increasing Indigenous teachers, staff, and administration.

#### *Who We Are*

As Indigenous and non-Indigenous female scholars, we have embraced the notion of relational learning in our professional and personal interactions. While we did not study together, we have known one another throughout our doctoral journeys and into the post-PhD period. We have been fortunate to have mentors who have actively engaged in decolonizing methodologies for over thirty years to guide us in our journeys. These mentors recognize the ethical challenges that arise within multidisciplinary contexts and encouraged us to connect with like-minded scholars engaging in decolonizing research and education. One of our strengths in completing doctoral programs and entering the workforce at this political point in time is the ability to have functioned within administrative, instruction, and student capacities simultaneously as institutions began to explore the post-TRC release of the *Calls to Action* period. Within this paper, our voice is both singular and plural as we move in and out of individual and collective experiences and reflections.

Emily Grafton is a member of the Metis nation. She grew up in Treaty 1, in the heart of the Metis nation's homeland of the Red River, and currently lives with her family in Treaty 4. Dr. Grafton's research has focused on the role of settler colonialism and neo-colonialism in the evolution of Canadian federalism regarding sub-state jurisdiction-making and its impact on Indigenous sovereignty. In addition to her experiences as an

Indigenous student, she has taught courses in Native studies and political science. Dr. Grafton has been involved in research centred on decolonizing various disciplines including healthcare, education, and museums. Currently, her work focuses on decolonization, Indigenization, and reconciliation in post-secondary institutions whereby Dr. Grafton takes an administrative lead to envision how this can take place within and outside classroom and research contexts.

Rebecca Major is an educator of mixed ancestry from an urban environment, with much of her youth spent in the bush. Her father was Mi'kmaq and Acadian and her mother is Metis and Scottish. Ms. Major's positionality is influenced by all of her cultural connections. The majority of her formal academic teaching experience has been in Indigenous studies, teaching in a northern setting where most students were Indigenous and with limited experience in urban environments. This requires different popular cultural references when relating knowledge to real life experiences as well as acknowledging that the students experience different life obstacles, making administration management different. As an Indigenous student and then an educator, she is cognizant that Indigenous knowledge systems/epistemology are relational and, therefore, much learning happens by understanding knowledge in the context of a non-Eurocentric worldview. Ms. Major currently is working towards understanding how Indigenous policy is changing in Canada, to result in a unique paradigm shift.

Elizabeth Cooper is seventh generation British settler origin on her paternal side and third generation Polish and Swedish-Sāmi origin on her maternal side. Her family has resided in Treaty 1 Territory and the birthplace of the Métis nation since the late nineteenth century. She recognizes the importance that all people play within the process of reconciliation and she recognizes the lessons that can be learned across nations to ensure we are moving towards a place of healing. Dr. Cooper pursues inquiry through Indigenous methodologies and community-based, qualitative, participatory, and arts-based practices to explore concepts of health, wellness, and decision-making practices. She has taught upper-level university courses in Indigenous studies and health sciences.

We have seen various dynamics at play as people try to engage in ethical practices within the academic institution, with varying degrees of success. We have found ourselves positioned as experts, asked for shortcuts to address mandates and ways to implement superficial recommendations to improve Indigenous education with regards to content, context, and approach. We have all spent time thinking about what works, what does not work, and why some of our efforts have had different results than that of our colleagues. Our approach has led to anecdotal

success in creating a platform for multidimensional engagement and learning. This has been achieved through the creation of relationships that address and move beyond tokenism in humanities, social sciences, and health sciences faculties.

### *Challenge One: Unlearning the Status Quo*

The process of unlearning histories, unpacking concepts of privilege, and recognizing that privilege is not inherently bad or wrong are critical to students' learning experiences. As institutions are mandating increased Indigenous-specific content in classes, the diversity of students who begin to engage with concepts is vast. Educators need to consider the plethora of contextual positioning that students have. These include but are not limited to Indigenous students, settler-Canadians, Canadian newcomers, international students, students of visible minorities, and students who have been marginalized for other reasons such as gender identity or disability. Additionally, students from multidisciplinary contexts such as basic science, engineering, health science, humanities, social science, and law can be found in the same classrooms, all bringing disciplinary biases in addition to cultural perceptions to the classroom. As such, attempting to create a safe space for engaged learning and decolonization can be a challenge, even for the most experienced instructor. Within this space, there must be a shared understanding of what is and is not acceptable, and the language used must reflect the goal of creating a space that is free of overt and inadvertent prejudice—both through the use of space and the use of language.

In our experience, many students approach learning as a transactional experience. They have paid for a class and they expect to be able to complete tasks or memorize information that will lead to their expected grade within the course. If they memorize core content they should achieve a good grade. This educational mindset and mandatory course requirements in programs often lead students to perpetuate negative stereotypes without questioning the statements they are making. Within courses focused on health, this often appears regarding the “drunk” Indigenous parent when writing about fetal alcohol spectrum disorder. Other students discuss “prejudice within hospitals”, without considering if prejudice is a result of individual positionality, systemic racism, and policy limitations that affect the ability to provide medical care.

The positioning by students of the university as a business and the course instructor or professor as a person that needs to go above and beyond to provide students with the tools to achieve high academic standing is not unique to our experiences (McNair, Paretti, & Davitt, 2010). While we believe in clear marking criteria, we also hold that subjective and



objective knowledge must be part of the learning process. A transactional approach does not fit within a teaching pedagogy of engaged learning or culturally responsive practices (Bullen & Flavell, 2017). When facilitating critical thinking practices and targeting human development, we feel that the learning environment should not be treated as a business transaction.

Many disciplines do not focus on the nuanced distinctions between cultural awareness, sensitivity, safety, and responsiveness (Bin-Sallik, 2003; Taylor, Durey, Mullcock, Kickett, & Jones, 2014). Without having theoretical positioning behind these concepts, it is difficult to engage in decolonization and reconciliation. If instructors/professors do not know how to support these concepts, they will likely struggle to explain the importance to students and may not be able to engage effectively within an Indigenous epistemological framework. We argue that understanding and working within such a framework is of utmost importance within Indigenous education at the post-secondary level.

One of the privileges of academia is the freedom to challenge perceived norms; however, finding ways to engage students in critical reflexivity can be a challenge. One of the best ways that we have found to do this is to broaden the relational space where learning takes place. Often the use of real-world examples, guest speakers, and participatory activities help students shift their thinking and begin to engage in relational learning.

### *Challenge Two: Creating Relational Space*

A critical approach to creating space to move beyond tokenism within decolonizing education is using a pedagogical approach that centres on relational learning. This process encompasses constructs of relational space, relational ethics, and cultural responsiveness (Browning, Meyer, Truog, & Solomon, 2007; Fosshage, 2011; Lewis, 2016; McNair et al., 2010). Relational learning is important because it provides the opportunity to critically engage with knowledge gained from various contexts (Browning et al., 2007; Konrad & Browning, 2012). It also allows for the ability to unpack constructs of tacit knowledge or the ideas that we hold to be true because our experience and cultures teach us that it is true in a potentially non-stigmatizing way. Many academic classes operate through an explicit knowledge exchange; we argue, however, that true decolonizing education comes from unpacking the tacit knowledge that shapes positionality and the knowledge that is prioritized across contexts. We believe it is important for people to feel safe and supported throughout the learning process.

While we strongly believe that an ethic of care is important for educators (Hawk, 2017), we realize that there are constraints about how involved an instructor can be in students' lives. It is important for bound-

aries to exist and people must navigate individual parameters. We believe that it is important for people to feel safe and supported throughout the learning process. We also hold that there is a need to remain cognizant of issues related to transference and to try to make sure that the instructors do not take on the feelings and emotions presented by students. Many students, regardless of ethnicity, age, gender identity, and socioeconomic status, have difficulties in their lives: it is easy for compassionate, caring people to be affected by the challenges and traumas of their students. This may be especially true when working to actively engage in processes of reconciliation wherein students may share stories related to intergenerational colonial trauma (Maxwell, 2014; Prussing, 2014), such as how the Sixties Scoop has affected their lives (Dubinsky, 2010; Strong-Boag, 2011), experiences with unequal access to services and supports, and the suicide epidemic plaguing communities across Canada (Elias, Mignone, Hall, Hong, Hart, & Sareen, 2012; Kay, 2013; Kirmayer, Brass, Holton, Paul, Simpson, & Tait, 2007). Caring about students does not mean acting as a counsellor, being available 24-7, or fixing problems that are beyond the scope of the class. It does not mean allowing students to complete sub-standard work for the same grade as students who have not disclosed challenges. An ethic of care includes the realization that there are challenges that occur within students' lives, being patient and understanding, and making appropriate accommodations whenever possible. Accommodations may span beyond university mandates. These may include allowing children to be present within classes for those who do not have childcare, providing extra assistance outside the scope of normal duties pertaining to academic skill development, and may include assignment or participation accommodation for those that have to be away due to tragedy, such as a family suicide. It is important for students to have ownership of their education. In instances where students have faced difficult situations in their lives that have limited their academic performance, informal accommodations are essential to create an environment for continued engaged learning. For example, one community had a rash of suicides, each requiring multiple days to attend funerals. To accommodate missed class discussions and not penalize the student, (s)he was given the opportunity to write an individual reflection piece based on the class readings. An ethic of care includes being responsive, within reason, to the needs of students and engaging in a genuine manner with students within all interactions (Hawk, 2017).

A key aspect of the creation of responsive relationships and spaces is understanding that people learn well when they are able to help determine the course of their education. Students need to be able to ask questions and



address challenges in a place where they feel free to do so. This will move the learning process beyond tokenism to a place of engagement and reconciliation.

### *Challenge Three: Defining the Expert*

Understanding who an expert is constitutes part of relational space. It is especially important to remain cognizant of this when teaching course content that focuses on Indigenous issues and experiences. At times the instructor will be the expert, whereas at other times this role will fall to other people from within the community and may even fall to students within the classroom setting. Within these moments, the role of the instructor becomes one of facilitation within the classroom setting. When the instructor cannot fit the need and bring in another academic or person from the community, the instructor must build that relationship.

Asking a community expert to come and speak to the class often requires more than an email or phone call, although at times this will suffice. There may be cultural protocols that need to be followed, depending on the guest speaker. These differ depending on the age, language, or cultural heritage of the Knowledge Keeper as well as the gifts or teachings to be shared, their religious and spiritual beliefs, and a myriad of other aspects. If an instructor is unsure of protocol, it is always best to ask. Some institutions have developed protocol documents to aid in navigating these scenarios (City of Saskatoon, 2017; University of Manitoba Faculty of Health Sciences, 2013). It is possible to ask the guest speaker about protocol before requesting they present at the class. Often people will be happy to help navigate this process. An honorarium or gift, although not always necessary, is usually recommended for any expert that comes to speak with a class. Alternatively, the use of video that documents oral histories is useful and readily available from sources, such as the National Collaborating Centre for Aboriginal Health (2018), to provide authentic voices of expertise.

As part of creating a relational space for engaged learning between the instructor, the class, and the guest speaker, it is important to ask about space requirements and whether the speaker is comfortable speaking within a formal classroom setting or would prefer the class meet in an alternate location. At times, this may include the class going to meet the guest speaker in a park, community centre, public library, or their place of employment, whereas at other times the guest may want to be able to sit in a circle or to smudge within a university classroom. It is the responsibility of the instructor to make sure these accommodations are acknowledged, met, and arranged prior to the class. It is also important for the instructor to brief the class about any changes to the structure of the

class to mitigate any challenges that may occur from changes in student's expectations about the class. Guest speakers can provide nuance that may not be possible through lectures or readings. In some instances, appropriate written sources may not be available. For example, intergenerational colonial trauma is an important issue that relates to current and historic experiences. To explain the lived consequences of historical trauma to students, a guest speaker who works in a remote Indigenous healing centre came in and ran a theatre workshop with students, discussing her own experiences with trauma and that of her community. This was a very powerful experience for students, many of whom could personally relate to the guest speakers' experiences. As part of the relationship process, in addition to an honorarium, the instructor worked with the guest speaker in weeks following the class to connect the speaker with other resources within Indigenous health research to help further her professional work.

It is important that everyone, including students, remain cognizant of the fact that expertise on a subject is not necessarily linked to cultural identity. It is also not the responsibility of Indigenous students or scholars to be the voice of all Indigenous peoples and experiences. Indigenous academics are finding themselves in a position of being asked to speak within numerous, diverse contexts. The authors, for example, have been put in difficult positions of being asked to speak for people from other territories and cultural backgrounds. While recognizing the attempt to have an authentic voice, it puts an added pressure on Indigenous academics to try to explain when they are or are not an appropriate resource. Part of the role of the educator, especially when addressing Indigenous content, is to ensure that voyeurism and tokenism are not being perpetuated within the classroom. Also, appropriation of voice is a concern and the educator must be able to use enough discretion when analyzing if the community member has the authorization to be a voice of that community. This knowledge comes from the relationships that the educator forms within and outside the classroom.

#### *Challenge Four: Required Content*

Various universities across Canada have mandated that students are required to take a course with Indigenous content to obtain a degree. For some disciplines that have interactions with a larger Indigenous population base, such as nursing, social work, and education, some universities with which we have been affiliated have mandated Indigenous content courses for many years. It is only within the past few years that this mandate has become more broadly construed. Often, institutions are faced with a lack of capacity to meet the demand for these requirements. There may

not be enough instructors to teach this content, instructors may not be well-equipped to deliver the content, or they may not be able to navigate the complexities of content that is based in Indigenous worldviews or that grapples with the complexities of colonialism and trauma in contemporary society. This can result in either substandard curriculum or instruction. It's important that universities build the capacity needed to meet such a requirement. This can include investing and supporting Indigenous graduate students and scholars or non-Indigenous peoples interested in Indigenous-centred research and pedagogies to ensure that these courses are engaged in ethical practices.

Preconceived notions of Indigenous learning or research as land-based, community-based, or driven by reflexivity or story also need to be addressed. While these may be components of Indigenous pedagogy, if they are approached as a checkbox means to learning or an attempt to be culturally relevant, the standard of what relational learning entails falls flat. A recent conversation with a colleague who was very proud of her attempt to Indigenize the classroom for a business course demonstrated the challenges that can arise from a checkbox to cultural responsiveness approach. She assigned a creative writing piece whereby students were asked to write about what they learned in a sweat lodge (without ever having attended a sweat lodge or having spoken with people who had attended a sweat). When concerns with this approach were raised, the instructor responded that creative writing does not require experiential or cultural specific knowledge, and that this does not minimize the cultural responsiveness of the assignment. The courses in question may be in fields that have little to do with traditional spirituality, such as finance or epidemiology. The confusion of ceremony with pedagogy is challenging. It is important that educators find a balance between cultural engagement and decontextualization of ceremony. While there may be instances where observation or participation is appropriate, engaging in such activities must ensure that significant cultural activity is not trivialized and secularized: it must be authentic and have genuine meaning. And further, when such an appropriate instance does arise, those participating must ensure that proper cultural protocols are met, including but not limited to provision of cloth, tobacco, honorarium, and proper attire. It is also important to remain cognizant of the breadth of various epistemologies, ontologies, and traditions that encompass Indigenous experiences within Canada.

We have found that place-based learning is effective in shifting the dialogue from a Eurocentric epistemology to an Indigenous pedagogical approach. When the opportunity arises, taking the classroom outside changes the perspective of the discourse. In group discussions, it is easier

to manipulate the space of how we interact with each other (sit in circles) and some of the institutional pressures that may be in the subconscious tend to fade away. Students who are shy in the classroom demonstrate their ability in a less formal environment. For those who are new to relational learning, changing the learning environment can assist in facilitating new perspectives. For some, understanding other perspectives is promoted by removing them from their area of comfort.

### *Challenge Five: Measuring Quality*

When content and context are taken into consideration, traditional academic measures of success need to be modified. If one of the objectives of the course is to create an environment where reflexivity, relational learning, and decolonization take place, the way that quality and knowledge is determined—along with various misperceptions—need to be addressed. The first of these is that classes largely comprised of Indigenous students must be modified because Indigenous students are incapable of performing to the same standard as their non-Indigenous peers. The second misperception is that alternative course assignments are easier.

These attitudes are a continuation of historical concepts of the capability of Indigenous peoples based on cultural misunderstandings. As educators, we strive for professionalism in all settings while acknowledging that the different settings come with different challenges. Part of the standard of assessing the quality of education is the evaluation of students through assignments. Whether instructing in the north or the urban environment, using examples that students can relate to is helpful. For example, within an urban environment we have asked students to draw on personal experiences with local outreach centres; in rural environments, specific events that the instructor knows most students took part in within the community, such as a community breakfast, were used. The authors have found it is effective to employ Indigenous and decolonizing methods when engaging within classroom settings of teaching as well as assignments that are suitable for multiple learning environments (see Archibald, 2008; Kovach, 2009; and Wilson, 2008 for examples of employing Indigenous research methods within Canadian contexts).

Educators should account for different learning styles in the classroom. Some students are visual learners while others rely on audio supports and this is the case across cultures. Just as there are different learning styles, students will also have different strengths in completing assignments: it is important to have a variety of assignment formats for grading to allow for students' academic development and demonstration of knowledge competency. Assignments are often the best tool for decolonizing the classroom

as it is an opportunity to encourage students to reflect on their views in the context of the course material. It was discussed at the beginning of this paper that two of the authors were engaged in a conversation that led to a comparison of assignments and classroom methods. The scrapbook discussed is an example of how students can reflect and express themselves while constituting a method for critiquing a student's academic activity. For example, to grade the scrapbook, a marking scheme was used that outlines what is expected of the student and which enables a level of objectivity on a subjective project. A major component of such an assignment is personal reflection in journal format using written, video, or artistic entries that connect discussion to classroom material. By using a scrapbook as one of the several assignments, it allows the student to step away from the recipe-writing term paper, be reflexive in their thoughts, and allow for relational learning.

For traditional assignments such as term papers, cited sources can be considered. Historically, term papers relied heavily on written primary sources and Eurocentric academic sources, which marginalize the Indigenous peoples' experiences, voice, and worldview. In the Canadian court system, the precedence set for valuing oral testimony equally to written historic record has transcended into the academic world of research and education (Cruikshank, 1992). Many Indigenous students have connections to traditional Knowledge Keepers but it is equally important not to assume that they have those connections. Should they have relations that can inform their research they should be encouraged to use these resources. Clear guidelines and protocols should be established for such sources, including the limitations of conducting interviews without university ethics approval. By involving Indigenous Knowledge Keepers as sources, the educational institution is acknowledging the validity of multiple knowledge systems, making a step towards reconciliation.

### *Discussion*

When conducting research with respect to Indigenous peoples, it is important that educational methods account for Indigenous worldviews and systems of knowledge. According to Shawn Wilson (2001), there are four aspects that make up a paradigm when conducting research: ontology, the belief in the nature of reality; epistemology, how you think about that reality; methodology, how to use your way of thinking to gain more knowledge about your reality; and paradigm axiology, a set of morals or ethics. Indigenous paradigms account for the ontology and epistemology. Wilson explains, "there is no one definite reality but rather different sets of relationships that make up an Indigenous ontology" (2008, p. 73). Indige-



nous epistemology is embedded and “found in theories, philosophies, histories, ceremonies, and stories as way of knowing” (Little Bear, 2009, p. 24). By understanding paradigms in this fashion, Indigenous morals (axiology) lie within methods (conversations) (Kovach, 2010) and dissemination strategies (Archibald, 2008). This helps create validity and authenticity to guide a large Indigenous paradigm of research. Conducting Indigenous research this way positions the research within Eurocentric mainstream and Indigenous research bodies, providing validity in both communities.

As distinguished by Margaret Kovach (2010), there is an Indigenous paradigm that rests within Indigenous methodology: “This means that this particular research approach flows from an Indigenous belief system that has at its core a relational understanding and accountability to the world” (p. 42). This perspective is significant to the research as the change studied is initiated by peoples that come from Indigenous worldviews who often view their identity in the context of the land. This is a relational understanding of self. Wilson (2008) makes this same connection between the dominant paradigms and the Indigenous paradigms, explaining that Eurocentric philosophy treats knowledge as individual while Indigenous philosophy understands it as relational. When one understands the worldview concept identified in Indigenous research, one can relate this to the classroom experience. In comprehending these relational and reflexive concepts centered on reconciliation in the educational setting, measuring quality will encompass more than the transactional idea of education and will shift to a more reconciliation-based model. One particular method to carefully consider if cultural responsiveness, relational learning, and reconciliation are taking place within education settings is through reflexivity. Reflexivity accounts for researcher bias and culture, voice, truth, and analysis through transcendence (Berger, 2015; Pillow, 2003; Reinhartz, 1997). This allows for the research to be relational, a concept at the core of Indigenous knowledge. Working with students to try to unpack these concepts is an important part of decolonizing the classroom and creating a space for responsive, engaged learning. It is possible for these practices to cross many disciplines. During a guest lecture, environmental science students were engaged with traditional knowledge, community activism, and the impacts that extraction activities have that span beyond scientific, evidence-based research findings. This helped students understand the breadth of the issues they were learning about and to better understand why extraction activities are opposed by many communities. A similar discussion could take place within a class exploring Indigenous health, public policy, or business.

Cultural responsiveness is similar to the notion of cultural safety but expands a step beyond this construct. Culturally responsive education

includes creating a space for people to be empowered intellectually, socially, emotionally, and politically. It necessitates the role of cultural knowledge in shaping experiences, positioning, and expectations, and ensures that people respect that there are aspects of culture that are both a part of and counter to mainstream culture. It recognizes that students' cultural positioning is a meaningful source for developing and maintaining optimal spaces for engaged learning (Giovanangeli & Oguro, 2016; Tanner, Hermond, Vairez, & Leslie, 2017; The Education Alliance, 2008). We are called upon to create spaces for learning but, in turn, we must act as facilitators for students to be the ones to engage in critical reflection. Facilitating group discussions needs to follow best practices for facilitating focus groups: monitoring response effect, where students follow the lead of a strong voice within the group; deference effect, where students try to convey what they think others want to hear; reactivity and subjectivity of the facilitator, where the facilitator clearly exhibits cues to let students know if the facilitator agrees with the thoughts being shared; and competing interest bias, where students have their own platform that may not meet the objectives of the discussion. The final effect that needs to be monitored is expectancy effect, where the facilitator leads those participating in a discussion to a given, predetermined conclusion (Onwuegbuzie & Johnson, 2006). Depending on the educational context, this final effect may be necessary but it should be done in such a way as to gently guide students to a given conclusion. Facilitating group conversations, especially around issues that may be contraindicated to a student's epistemology, requires multiple opportunities throughout the term to critically reflect on dominant notions of power, autonomy, and ethics. Through providing a culturally responsive space within the classroom, we have found that students are more likely to mirror the culturally responsive space within their interactions with one another, within and outside of the classroom, as the term progresses.

Indigenous pedagogy expands beyond the content taught to include the approach used (Gaudry & Hancock, 2012; Ormiston, 2014; Ray & Cormier, 2012; Wildcat, McDonald, Irlbacher-Fox, & Coulthard, 2014). At times, the approach may be a more salient construct than the content, as long as the content is factual. Attempts to shift the dialogue to one of decolonization within academic settings need to move beyond lip service and tokenism: they need to include more than a nod to the land that we stand on to fully consider what those phrases mean. We need to think of how we can teach the Indigenous way of understanding to non-Indigenous peoples. This involves recognizing the meaning placed in different actions and not trivializing the importance of Knowledge Keepers and knowledge users.

If we shift the discussion beyond “How can we ensure that the TRC’s *Calls to Action* are addressed?” to considering “What is the spirit behind the *Calls to Action*?”, we will be able to cultivate critical reflexivity as well as responsiveness to the importance of decolonizing education within students and faculty. Recognizing who the experts are is an essential component of reconciliation. This applies across all academic disciplines. Interdisciplinary and mixed-methods approaches are of utmost importance as we continue to grow. This applies beyond research to education and includes calling upon others who have the topic-specific expertise to be present within the student engagement and learning processes. Instructors need to move beyond tokenism to a place where relational learning and cultural responsiveness is the norm. Tokenism is damaging to the validity of Indigenous experience. By truly incorporating Indigenous pedagogy (relational learning) in the institutions and providing credit to Indigenous agency, the Indigenous person and Indigenous epistemology can then truly be legitimized and not a mere token. With this shift in practice, reconciliation moves beyond conception to operation.

### *Limitations*

The approaches presented are based on our experience and have not been evaluated through formal mechanisms. We have been able to triangulate our experiential knowledge across two provinces and four academic institutions to determine what we feel are the key challenges and potential pathways to success, and feel that this thick description adds to the validity of our account. As all the authors are female, we recognize that there may be gender bias in our approach. We contend that the challenges and thoughts for consideration we identify span beyond gender contexts. In addition, we are all social scientists. While we work within interdisciplinary and mixed-methods contexts, we cannot speak to other disciplinary experiences. We do feel that our proposed approach for addressing key challenges can be applied within other contexts, and we have done so in guest and advisory capacities with success. Within Canada, we are still navigating the process of reconciliation and employing Indigenous pedagogical approaches within the academy. Much space remains for theoretical and applied studies related to defining experts, recognizing cultural brokers, and identifying community gatekeepers within post-secondary contexts. There is limited literature on required course content related to Indigenous issues and how to develop or grade non-traditional academic assignments. These are not well defined beyond practical application for professional applied engagement with Indigenous people in fields such as medicine and social work. Finally, while we recognize the importance of online education

platforms, these have their own unique challenges and strengths and require different considerations about how to foster relational learning and culturally responsive educational opportunities.

### Conclusion

Canadian academic institutions are in the midst of trying to address the TRC's *Calls to Action*. While these ideas are being brought to the forefront of public consciousness, they are not new concepts. Perhaps what is innovative is the desire to operationalize these concepts and create meaningful change rather than tokenism across multiple disciplines throughout the country. Our research and pedagogical approach stems from the recognition that there are a number of harms caused by colonial practices and policies, including but not limited to the systemic discrimination and dismissiveness of the Indigenous voice. We recognize that true change needs to move beyond tokenism to a place of relational learning and reconciliation. Through the creation of spaces for engaged learning, relationship building, and the celebration of those outside of academic contexts who hold knowledge and can act as teachers and leaders within the learning process, we will be able to begin to apply a decolonizing educational approach and move towards meaningful change and institutional healing.

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