

INDIGENIZING TEACHER EDUCATION: AN ACTION RESEARCH PROJECT

Julian Kitchen, Brock University

Marg Raynor, Brock University

ABSTRACT

This action research report focuses on a new elective course entitled “Indigenizing Education: Education for/about Aboriginal Peoples” that was developed and taught by two teacher educators—one Euro-Canadian and the other Métis. The purpose of the course was to increase understanding of Indigenous peoples and of the impact of colonization on Aboriginal communities. The course had an experiential orientation: participation by an Aboriginal Elder, educators working in Aboriginal settings, and educators who incorporate Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy into mainstream classrooms. Action research was conducted to determine the degree to which the course achieved its purpose with a view to enhancing future iterations of this course and contributing to teacher educator knowledge about effective teacher education approaches to including Aboriginal content and ways of knowing in teacher education. In particular, the authors were interested in the degree to which teacher candidates were responsive to Indigenous elements in the curriculum and teaching. Given the Aboriginal focus of this research, the Medicine Wheel is employed as an Indigenous framework for presenting and analyzing the findings.

PURPOSE

Two teacher educators—one Euro-Canadian and the other Métis—developed and taught a course titled “Indigenizing Education: Education for/about Aboriginal Peoples.” At the same time, we engaged in an action research project on the effectiveness of this course in addressing the learning needs of the nine teacher candidates in this 20 hour course. As this was an elective course, it was compressed from the usual ten sessions of two hours into

three Saturdays during September/October 2011; a 3 hour morning session was followed by a 3.5 hour afternoon session.

According to the course outline, the purpose was to increase “knowledge and understanding of Indigenous peoples, issues and ways of knowing in Canada and around the world are relevant to all educators” by challenging “teacher candidates to reflect on the foundational role and ongoing influence of Aboriginal people in Canada, the impact of colonization on Aboriginal communities, contemporary issues in Aboriginal education, and the personal and professional implications of these topics for the teachers of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.” The course design was intended to move teacher candidates “beyond learning about Aboriginal education to indigenizing education through practical approaches to teaching about Aboriginal peoples and bringing Indigenous understandings into education for all students.” The course had a strong experiential orientation, which included ceremonies, Indigenous learning strategies, and involvement by Aboriginal Elders, educators working in Aboriginal settings, and educators who have incorporated Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy into mainstream classrooms.

The purpose of this action research is to determine the impact of the course on teacher candidates with a view to enhancing future iterations of this course and contributing to teacher educator knowledge about effective teacher education approaches to including Aboriginal content and ways of knowing in teacher education. In particular, we are interested in the degree to which teacher candidates were responsive to Indigenous elements in the curriculum and teaching.

The Medicine Wheel is employed as an Indigenous framework for presenting and analyzing the findings. For, Marg who is Métis, this framework came naturally as a means of making sense of experience. Julian, an academic in the Euro-Canadian tradition, was receptive, both as a sign of respect for the Aboriginal traditions presented in the course and an effective tool for considering the process of indigenizing the teaching and learning.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Knowledge and understanding of Indigenous peoples, issues and ways of knowing in Canada are relevant to all educators. As the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples [RCAP] (1996) noted, the education of non-Aboriginal teachers about Aboriginal history, traditions and ways of knowing benefits all students. “The quality of education Aboriginal students received in provincial and territorial schools depends on the willingness to create a supportive environment for them” (RCAP, 1996, 5.6). Teacher education that accurately presents Aboriginal history and culture includes Indigenous materials and practices, and builds relationships with parents and communities and can have a positive impact on Aboriginal student success. As important, according to the Royal Commission, is that the “non-Aboriginal person must be made aware of our history, our traditional lifestyle and the downfall and resurgence of our people as history has evolved today” (RCAP, 1996, 5.6). As a result, their report recommends a compulsory Aboriginal component in all teacher

education programs and the development of further options for pre-service preparation and on-going teacher professional development (RCAP, 1996).

The force of the arguments made by the Royal Commission is evident from developments in Ontario, where the Ontario Ministry of Education crafted a policy framework for Aboriginal education (2007) and resources for teaching about Aboriginal peoples (2009). Around the same time, the Association of Canadian Deans of Education approved the *Accord on Indigenous Education* (2010), which recognized that teacher education needed to better serve the educational needs of Indigenous peoples and improve the quality of education about Indigenous peoples for all Canadians. The course reviewed in this paper is an attempt to bring Indigenous understandings and pedagogy to teacher candidates who intend to work with Aboriginal students and/or bring Indigenous understandings to mainstream classrooms.

Research indicates that teachers working with Aboriginal students need knowledge of Aboriginal peoples, some linguistic and cultural competency, and respect for Aboriginal worldviews (e.g., Battiste, 1997) in order to support Aboriginal students' educational accomplishment (Moyle, 2005). Culturally aligned teachers have a critical role to play as cultural brokers (Stairs, 1995) who balance Euro-Canadian curriculum with Aboriginal language and culture (Grande, 2004; Hodson, 2009). Their knowledge and linguistic and cultural competency are critical to supporting Aboriginal students' educational accomplishment (Moyle, 2005) and sustaining Aboriginal worldviews (Battiste, 1997).

It is generally acknowledged that most Canadians lack understanding of Aboriginal history, including the impact of residential schools, and of Indigenous ways of knowing (e.g., Curwen Doige, 2003; St. Denis, 2007).

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

This course was designed to extend beyond learning about Aboriginal education to *Indigenizing* education through practical approaches to teaching about Aboriginal peoples and bringing Indigenous understandings into education for all students. In this course, rather than learning about Indigenous values and beliefs from the outside, teacher candidates learned through Indigenous practice and from Indigenous educators and an Elder. This is consistent with the thinking of Aboriginal educational researchers, such as Marie Battiste (2005), who "affirm and activate the holistic paradigm of Indigenous knowledge to reveal the wealth and richness of Indigenous languages, worldviews, teachings, and experiences, all of which have been systematically excluded from contemporary educational institutions and from Eurocentric knowledge systems." As Hodson (2006) writes, Aboriginal people need to "leave 'pedagogy' behind on the dust heap of history and begin to think, speak and do 'Indigagogy,' the art of teaching/learning with Indigenous peoples." Indigagogy is grounded in an understanding of relationships among learners, between teachers and learners, and between epistemologies. Indigagogy shifts the focus from Aboriginal people being viewed as victims to them embracing "our subjectivity and boldly declares we are part of creation and creation is part of us" (Hodson, 2006).

The Medicine Wheel

Holistic concepts of teaching and learning, embodied in Medicine Wheel Teachings of the Anishnawbe, informed our design of the course and, subsequently, our presentation of the findings. The Medicine Wheel, an ancient symbol used by several Native peoples in North America, was originally constructed of a stone circle, with spokes extending to the four directions. It represents balance and relationship in the human personality as represented in four aspects: spirit, emotions, intellect, and body. There are four parameters to the Medicine Wheel as a tool for curriculum design and research analysis: visioning, relating, knowing, and acting. “The Medicine Wheel illustrates symbolically that all things are interconnected and related, spiritual, complex, and powerful” according to Battiste (2009). As Ermine (1995) writes, “The outcrops of stone and rock known as Medicine Wheels survive from a time when our people were actively exploring inner space... They speak...about the progressive growth of self through a cyclical journey of repetition, experience, and construction of meaning...They give us insight into our common humanity and our connectedness” (p.107). Connectedness on multiple levels would be one defining feature of curriculum informed by Medicine Wheel teachings: connection between one’s inner and outer world; connection between peers, teachers and students; connection with the natural environment; and connection between subject areas. As Youngblood (2009) states, “The interaction among all these parts is what is felt to be important, rather than the different parts themselves” (p.259).

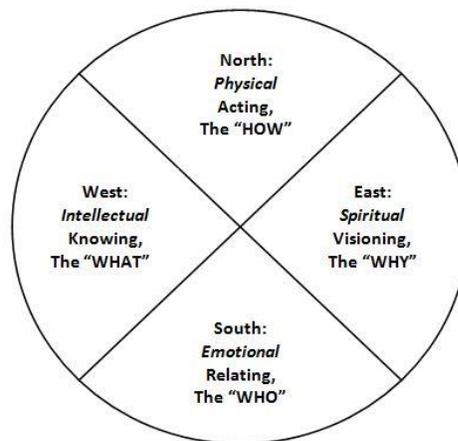


Figure 1: Holistic Medicine Wheel Model of Learning

For this paper, we have employed verb forms, instead of the more commonly used descriptors (spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical), to represent teaching and learning processes through the lens of Medicine Wheel teachings. We take this liberty with terminology in recognition of the adaptability of holistic Medicine Wheel concepts to a wide variety of applications.

The Medicine Wheel model is concerned with process situated in daily human experience in a constantly changing environment. In the Medicine Wheel model, learning progresses simultaneously across spiritual, emotional, intellectual, and physical parameters. The

Medicine Wheel model is more appropriate to Indigenous education as it conceptualize learning not through the intellect in isolation, but rather as a dynamic process, situated simultaneously in the head and heart, body and spirit. As one teacher candidate wrote about the course designed using these principles, “It was a very positive and personally significant experience. Related to me as a human being, not just a teacher candidate.”

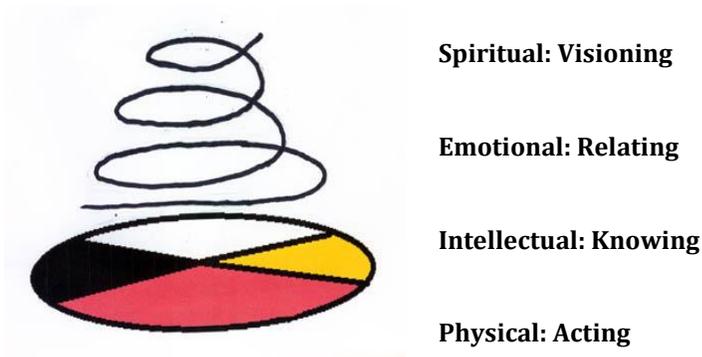


Figure 2: Medicine Wheel Model of Thinking Skills (by Marg, 2012)

METHOD

Action research is generally defined as a form of research wherein a professional, actively involved in practice, engages in systematic, intentional inquiry into some aspect of that practice for the purpose of understanding and improvement (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 1990; McNiff, 2002). Simply stated, action research looks for answers to the question, “How do I improve my work?” (Whitehead, 1989). The inquiry process involves data gathering, reflection on the action as it is presented in the data, generating evidence through the data, and making claims to knowledge based on conclusions drawn from validated evidence (McNiff, 2002). Improvement is broadly directed to enhancing learning for the student (Laidlaw, 1992). Our approach to action research is teacher-initiated and teacher-directed, with the end goal of improving practice, and ultimately improving schools (Sagor, 1992). Sagor (1992) acknowledges that individual teachers frequently undertake action research alone, based on an issue they have identified within their teaching context. The degree of individual autonomy offered by this model was consistent with our commitment to employing Indigenous methods such as the Medicine Wheel and suited our teaching situation.

The research framework involved identifying a research question: How responsive were teacher candidates to the ‘Indigenizing Education’ course as conceptualized and delivered by us? In reviewing the data, we were particularly interested in the ways in which teacher candidates responded to Indigenous ceremonies and learning strategies. We gathered and analyzed data with consideration given to the implications for future iterations of the course and for employing Indigenous content and ways of knowing in teacher education more generally.

Description of the Course

This course was intended as a broad introduction to “knowledge and understanding of Indigenous peoples, issues and ways of knowing in Canada and around the world are relevant to all educators.” It challenge students to “reflect on the foundational role and ongoing influence or Aboriginal people in Canada, the impact of colonization on Aboriginal communities, contemporary issues in Aboriginal education, and the personal and professional implications of these topics for the teachers of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students.” It was designed with a “strong experiential orientation” and featured visits by Aboriginal Elders, educators working in Aboriginal settings, and educators who have incorporated Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy into mainstream classrooms.

Experiential activities, class discussions, and perspectives from experienced educators helped candidates learn how to indigenize education for/about Aboriginal Peoples. The main activities are presented in the Findings section, alongside teacher candidate responses to these activities. Critical reflection on readings and in-class learning was 30% of the course grade; these were submitted electronically and instructors responded to them at length in advance of the next class. At the end of the course, groups of three presented verbal presentations on themes related to the history and culture of Aboriginal peoples in North America. The culminating individual assignment was a short curriculum unit on an Indigenous topic, or incorporate Indigenous elements into a topic, at any grade/educational level. This could be done individually or in groups.

Participants and Ethics

There were nine teacher candidates and all consented to being research participants. They consented to have their comments in class, reflective writings, course assignments and course feedback used as research data. As part of the university’s ethical clearance, teacher candidates’ signed consent forms were placed in a sealed envelope which was held until the course was completed and marks finalized; only at the end of the course did we discover that all students had agreed to participate, and that none had withdrawn subsequently. Great care was taken to ensure that none of the participants in this small class were identifiable through the data included in the research.

Data

Several sources of data were collected and analyzed. Data from students was in the form of written reflections, presentations, and curriculum projects. Course feedback questionnaires completed at the conclusion of the course were also reviewed. As the written reflections were a rich source of data on teacher candidates’ experience of the course—and the anonymous course evaluations were consistent with the reflections—there was no need for exit interviews. We as teacher educators wrote field notes in the form of reflective journals and through correspondence with each other. We also kept detailed lesson plans and our written responses to the work of teacher candidates.

Data was selected in relation to the learning outcomes for the course, which were to:

- understand the terms Indigenous and Aboriginal, and have a basic knowledge of the history and culture of First Nations, Metis and Inuit peoples in Canada;

- understand and experience Indigenous knowledge as an alternative, robust way of being in the world;
- be aware of the impacts of colonization on Aboriginal communities including the effects of reserves, residential schools and the erosion of cultural practices and institutions;
- identify and examine models, practices and curriculum suitable for Aboriginal education;
- develop strategies for incorporating Aboriginal perspectives into the mainstream curriculum;
- be able to use this knowledge when developing pedagogy for all students.

The first step in the analysis was to organize the data. We borrowed tenets of grounded theory to provide “a procedure for developing categories of information, interconnecting the categories, building a “story” that connects the categories, and ending with a discursive set of theoretical propositions” (Strauss & Corbin, 1990, as cited in Creswell, 1998, p. 15). We then reviewed the results independently to identify emerging patterns in the data while considering individual responses. We then independently reviewed the qualitative data before combining their categories in order to identify key overall findings and broad themes. In presenting the findings, the overall pattern of response, together with supportive quotes that illustrate the themes identified through analysis of participants’ anecdotal responses are included. Key themes were identified, then supported with quotes from teacher candidates on how they experienced the course. These themes were coded and analyzed to tease out meanings and connections that emerged from teacher candidate data.

At this stage, Marg suggested that we revisit the data and categories from an Indigenous perspective. Reflecting on the data, she proposed that the Medicine Wheel (an Indigenous concept presented in the course and used as a tool for curriculum organization) be employed as a way of organizing the data from teacher candidates. As these categories prove useful in working with the data, while honouring Indigenous understandings, we adopted the four aspects of the Medicine Wheel, as identified in Figure 3, as the key concepts around which we organize and presented the data. At the same time, in clustering data around these aspects of the Medicine Wheel, we were mindful that fluidity is an essential component of holistic Medicine Wheel thinking. The goal was to capture a “snapshot” of teacher candidate completion of the course, while recognizing that this is an ongoing process.

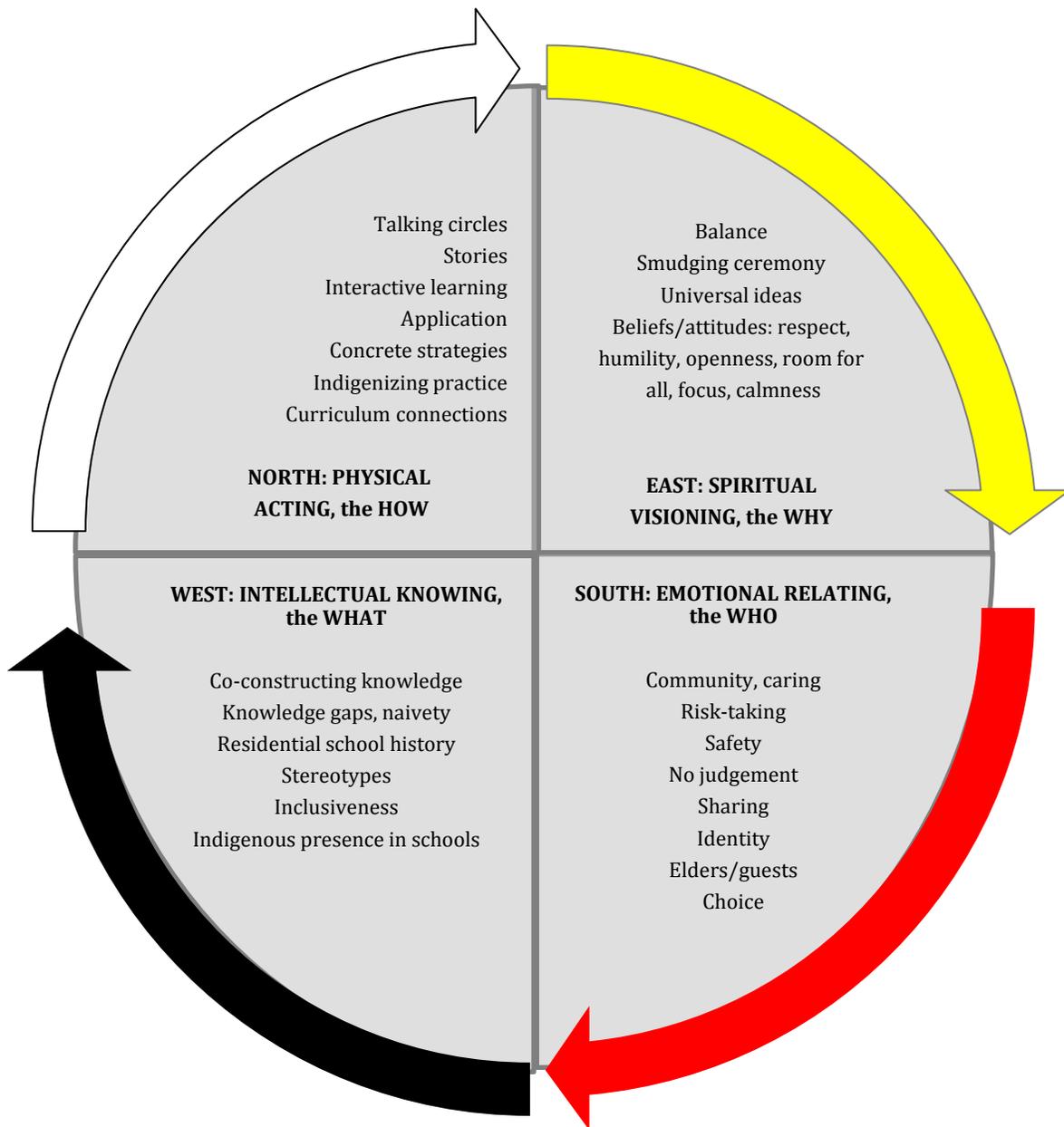


Figure 3: Key Concepts from Analysis

FINDINGS

In reporting the findings of our action research project, we have used the four parameters of the Medicine Wheel as an organizing frame. Under each, we identify our intentions as action researchers and offer evidence of what was learned by teacher candidates in relation to the characteristics associated with that quadrant. While the Medicine Wheel is a circle with no beginning or end point, we move with the sun rising from the eastern door

(Visioning) to the southern door (Relating) and the western door (Knowing) before ending at the northern door (Acting). This approach also aligns nicely with the action research process.

Visioning is an appropriate starting point because, as Ermine (1995) points out, “individuals and society can be transformed by identifying and reaffirming learning processes based on subjective experiences and introspection.” (p. 102). Also, as Doige suggests, the “evidence is strong for Aboriginal educators’ insistence that spirituality in learning is the essential link to wed traditional Aboriginal education and the Western system of education.” (Doige, 2003)



Figure 4: *The Missing Link by Marg.*

Visioning

Our vision of the course as a vehicle for Indigenizing teaching and learning, combined with teacher candidates’ receptivity to Indigenous ways of seeing the world, were critical to the success of the course. The eastern quadrant of the Medicine Wheel represents the spiritual or visioning aspect of life. Key words associated with this parameter are universal ideas, beliefs/attitudes, respect, humility, openness, room for all, balance, focus, and calmness.

The smudging ceremony, which was employed in all three of our day-long classes, is strongly associated with this visioning and this quadrant. We opened the course with this ceremony because as we had found it to be a powerful way of bringing mindfulness to our work in classrooms and other settings. We invited an Elder to lead the opening smudge at which sacred medicines (tobacco, sage, cedar, and sweet grass) were burned and words of Indigenous wisdom offered. The smoke represents an intention to purify mind and heart in order to establish clarity and balance. Teacher candidate receptivity to this practice was evidenced by their thoughtful tone that first morning and the request of students that we begin each day with Marg conducting a smudging ceremony. In the questionnaire completed at the end of the course, all students found this ceremony to be effective, with 8 of 9 identifying it as highly effective. Students wrote that the smudge felt “like you were participating in something sacred”, “got us ready for the day”, that it “created a calm and safe environment to learn in”, and that it “allowed for me to focus and find balance and humility”. One described the smudge as a “new spiritual experience. [It was] possibly the most valuable aspect of the course with regards to opening my mind to the cultures.” It was also evident that all the students felt a need for the spiritual and communal qualities made manifest by the ceremony. This is evident in this reflection on the smudging ceremony and its implications for Aboriginal learning:

As I learned from the smudging ceremony in one week, I will be more productive if I cleanse my mind of negative thoughts and be thankful for the things around me. I concluded that a Native approach to teaching would allow for all students to receive authentic, meaningful education. If we adopt Aboriginal practices and beliefs, we will be able to include all students in their education on a personal level. We can help them make personal connections to their learning and experience education in a meaningful way. I feel that an Aboriginal approach to education is an inclusive one and would make room for all students to succeed, without letting anyone fall by the wayside.

The importance of visioning through Indigenous methods was also evident in students' approach to using the Medicine Wheel in the unit planning assignment. For example, one teacher candidate wrote in his unit on healthy living:

The use of tobacco has been deemed 'unhealthy' but for indigenous people it is a part of tradition. Talks about how using tobacco for spiritual and cultural purposes is different from abusing tobacco are important to reassure Aboriginal students that they aren't doing anything wrong especially for students who are not self-identifying yet.

The foregoing comments suggests sensitivity to the challenge that self-identification as an Aboriginal person might pose if cultural identity has not previously been firmly established. The question might seem simple, but the answer may take years to articulate, as in the experience of Marg. Others identified Indigenous practices as relevant to multicultural classrooms and to building classroom "between the communities instead of perpetuating stereotypes and reinforcing an 'us versus them' mentality."

Relating

The relational dimension of the course was also critically important to the course design and to teacher candidates' experience of Indigagogy. The southern quadrant of the medicine, the direction of spring, focuses on growth. In this analysis, we consider, in particular, growth and nurturing of relationships. Key words that emerged, especially from responses regarding Talking Circles and guests, were community, caring, risk-taking, safety, no judgement, sharing, identity, Elders, learning from Aboriginal people, and choice.

Circles can range in degree of formality, with the most being a simple sharing circle with no theme or purpose. More structured circles can serve as learning formats for those who are just discovering traditional Aboriginal ways to foster harmony and kinship (Mi'Kmaq Spirit, 2011). More powerful is the healing circle, guided by a facilitator, to address specific issues affecting the learning community.

All the teacher candidates found the Talking Circles to be effective with 7 of 9 rating it highly effective. Among their comments:

At the beginning I was a bit awkward but smudging and positive atmosphere made me open up.

This class created a caring community where I felt welcome and eager every Saturday

[There was] a caring/understanding/welcoming atmosphere... every week.

These comments suggest that the Talking Circle was a positive and egalitarian space that encouraged relationship and a sense of equal engagement in the learning environment.

The Talking Circle was a feature of each class, although most teacher candidates had never participated in one before. The format of the circle allows for each individual to contribute to the group freely. Protocol usually involves a smudge, prayer, or reflection, followed by a statement of focus. An object such as a talking feather or talking stick is often passed around the circle. The person holding the object holds the floor, without interruption, until finished. One may choose to pass. More important than the symbol is the sense it engenders that each speaker is special and needs to be listened to with respect. This is reflected in this representative comment on the effects of the circle:

One of the most important elements in teaching is creating an atmosphere where students feel welcomed and are encouraged to learn. Validating student identity plays a key factor in this. Students need to be acknowledged and present in their education in order to pursue it.

Several also commented on circle time as time for self-reflection. As one teacher candidate said, circles were “a great way for us to not only get to know each other but to reflect in a safe setting.” Thinking more broadly about classroom learning, another wrote, “They allowed for self-reflection, which is a practice we should be using regularly as teachers.”

A couple teacher candidates, elaborated further on circles as vehicles for learning. One wrote, “So much can be learned through sharing and talking to others.” Another reflected that circles played a key role by allowing “us to get to know one another interact with course materials, co-construct knowledge, and learn holistically.” As a result of positive student experiences, Talking Circles emerged as teaching strategies in several of the unit assignments developed as part of their individual culminating projects.

Guest presenters, who employed circles in their presentations, also contributed to teacher candidates experiencing circles as open and safe environments in which to learn together. “All the speakers were GREAT. They were open, not intimidating or judging and they allowed us to ask questions to explore topics on which we were very naive,” wrote one teacher candidate. Our use of Talking Circles as a core instructional strategy during each class helped raise teacher candidates’ awareness of the Talking Circle as a robust model that may be used for a variety of purposes from simple sharing of views on a given topic, to

in-depth personal sharing/healing. Protocol usually involves a smudge/prayer/reflection, followed by a statement of focus. An object such as a talking feather or talking stick is often passed around the circle. The person holding the object holds the floor, without interruption, until finished.

The sense of relationship developed in the circle activities informed the classroom environment as a whole. This was evident in the highly collaborative work conducted in groups and the ease with which teacher candidates engaged in activities and shared with each other and with instructors. “[Talking Circles] allowed us to get to know one another, interact with course materials, co-construct knowledge, and learn holistically.”

Knowing

While visioning and relating are important, a course on Aboriginal education must also contribute to increasing knowing and understanding. The western quadrant of the Medicine Wheel represents the intellectual aspect of human beings: their knowing. Sharing of knowledge in this course was largely oral, along with readings, power point presentations and hands-on activities. Key words identified include co-construction, residential schools, stereotypes, inclusiveness and Indigenous presence.

The rationale was to explain which Aboriginal education needs to be considered within the historical and social context of colonial practices designed to eradicate Aboriginal languages and culture and facilitate assimilation into the dominant language and culture. Teacher candidates, even though they were particularly interested in Aboriginal education, expressed a lack of prior knowledge about Indigenous history, most notably about the impact of residential school on Aboriginal individuals and communities. They were surprised to learn of the harsh experiences of residential school survivors, and of the long-term harmful effects on Aboriginal communities. They were largely unaware of Prime Minister Stephen Harper (2008) formal apology on behalf of the Parliament of Canada on June 11, 2008, in which he noted that residential schools served to “remove and isolate children from the influence of their families, homes, traditions and cultures, and to assimilate them into the dominant culture.” He also acknowledged that “these institutions gave rise to abuse and neglect”, “created a void in many lives and communities,” and “undermined the ability of many to adequately parent their own children and sowed the seeds for generations to follow.” Although residential schools have left a legacy of cultural conflict, alienation, poor preparation for the workplace, and difficulty coping with life generally (Kirkness, 1992), the responses of teacher candidates highlighted that this remains largely neglected by educators.

After the first three hours of the full-day first session, which focused on ceremony, relationship within the group, and developing an understanding the living culture of local Aboriginal people, attention shifted in the afternoon to the history of colonialism, particularly residential schools. After the history lessons, one teacher candidate stated, “I had never realized how this awful part of Canadian history has affected Aboriginal communities before and connected it with the problems occurring present day- eye opening.” A second, found it “[h]elped a non-Aboriginal like me to get a firm grasp on what

life/education is like for Aboriginal people.” Thinking about Aboriginal students, one teacher candidate reflected, “I feel it is especially important for Aboriginal people to understand their own history and to begin the healing process by being able to discuss the social injustices with which their people have been faced.” Another highlighted the importance addressing this issue in order to break negative stereotypes that are widespread among Euro-Canadian students.

Acting

As teacher candidates will soon become classroom teachers, the course was designed to prepare them to indigenize their curriculum and teaching methods. The fourth quadrant of the medicine Wheel focuses on the physical aspect of people: acting. Action is the result of bringing our values/beliefs, our depth of relationships, and knowing into the physical plane. All of these are, indeed, reflected in action. Key words identified in regard to acting were Talking Circles, stories, interactive learning, application, concrete strategies, indigenizing practice, and curriculum connections.

Teacher candidates responded well to our modelling and the strategies we employed in class. Marg, a Métis educator, was able to offer a perspective from within an Aboriginal culture. In addition to drawing on pedagogical strategies developed over her years of teaching Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, Marg was also able to draw on ceremonial dimensions, notably drumming and singing, and arts and crafts, as part of the learning experience. Julian, a Euro-Canadian professor involved in Aboriginal teacher education, modelled respect for Aboriginal culture an openness to learning across cultures. We both modelled teaching strategies that were culturally responsive and suitable in many classroom contexts.



Figure 5: *Canoe Model of the Learning Journey by Marg, inspired by Swan, 1998*

As instructors, we witnessed many of the teaching and learning strategies reflected back in the work produced by teacher candidates. Several teacher candidates commented on “great take-away teaching strategies” and “concrete examples for how to employ these teaching strategies in the classroom.” One teacher candidate explicitly linked these teaching strategies leading to a “larger understanding of [the] holistic teaching approach [and] experiential learning.” This suggests that they saw these as much more than effective tips and tricks. This is echoed by another teacher candidate who “will try to employ Aboriginal teaching strategies into my classes (Medicine Wheel, Talking Circles). I now really want to also engage non-Aboriginal students in the class to dismantle biases and ignorance at a younger age.” Another appreciated opportunities to participate in key strategies several

times and explicit guidelines in how to use them effectively: “Talking Circles will be very effective in the classroom. We were given tools to implement them successfully.” Unit plan assignments provide examples of ways in which teacher candidates applied holistic frameworks to planning. As one teacher candidate reflected, “I felt... that all of the methods we discussed on approaching Aboriginal students and validating their identity could be translated to students of other cultural backgrounds.”

One strategy that proved very effective was employing storytelling as a critical part of Native history and culture. The course outline stated, “Through their exploration of Aboriginal storytelling, teacher candidates will learn the role of the storyteller in Native tribes; how culture and history were relayed through storytelling; and how storytelling was used as a teaching tool for youth in the community.” Instructor feedback noted “the [storytelling] unit has a distinctly Aboriginal focus, and is centred around the Aboriginal legend of the Loon’s necklace... The holistic, integrated approach along with the Talking Circle format... would continue to lend an Aboriginal perspective to any story that might be studied...”

The power of these tools is particularly evident in the culminating unit plans teacher candidates developed individually. For example, one teacher candidate wrote:

I have chosen to integrate Aboriginal themes into the Grade 8 Health and Physical Education Curriculum... Incorporating the teachings of the Medicine Wheel... provided a comprehensive and insightful way for students to evaluate their own healthy living patterns. The Medicine Wheel considers the physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual, which in my mind, are all important elements to also consider when reflecting on one’s health... [M [any Aboriginal youth and adults have been affected by intergenerational trauma. Effects of this trauma include issues from weight, low self-esteem, alcoholism, drug abuse and a disconnect from cultural values and beliefs... [T]his unit focuses on healthy eating and active living... These lessons will introduce Canada’s Food Guide: First Nations, Métis and Inuit.

Several teacher candidates developed units of study with a view to authenticity of cultural components, reflected in instructor feedback such as the following two examples.

You... provide a range of Aboriginal cultural experiences in your unit, including a guest speaker.

This unit is a great way to connect storytelling and drama. You have clearly described the purpose of this unit on Aboriginal storytelling and the content reflects many of our class discussions and readings, e.g. Talking Circle... You have attended to ‘authenticity’ through the online presentation by an elder and the selection of stories.

Storytelling, a basic feature of Indigenous teaching and learning, was modelled throughout the course. A couple teacher candidates developed units based on storytelling, while at the

same time, demonstrating sensitivity to Indigenous approaches. In particular, the attitude of inviting listeners to create their own meaning is respectful and quite culturally appropriate, as noted in instructor feedback to one teacher candidate:

This unit demonstrates sensitivity to essential features of Aboriginal story: active listening, time for processing, reflection, and space for individual interpretation... The activity of retelling story through a personal lens could be an accessible approach for the less involved student. Throughout the unit you invite rather than describe or try to ascribe meaning to story.

These quotations, with their understanding of both strategies and the deeper meaning behind them, reflects the understanding of Indigagogy most of the teacher candidates acquired from the unit plan and the course as a whole. Evaluation methods in several unit assignments included a variety of forms: oral, written, artistic, self and peer evaluation, thereby creating space for individuals to express their learning effectively.

Although this was a quarter credit course, compressed into three full days towards the beginning of the B.Ed. program, the course as envisioned seemed to have an impact on the actions of teacher candidates. Time was a greatest challenge, with several teacher candidates suggesting that the course be longer and spread out over a term. With time would have come more opportunities to connect with the Indigenous knowledge and teachings. This would have been welcomed by teacher candidates, who expressed an interest in visiting Native Friendship Centres and First Nations schools. Three, with our assist, were able to arrange final placements in First Nation schools nearby.

CONCLUSION

Indigenizing Education was both the title and the intent of this course. The sessions were structured on a dual model of pedagogy: mainstream and Indigenous. Indigenous ways of teaching and learning were represented through means such as ceremony, modeling by instructors, visiting Elders/guests, Talking Circles, activity-based learning, and reflection. In other words, the classes themselves provided an example of indigenizing curriculum. Teacher candidates were learning through experiencing a different pedagogy, grounded in holism.

Based on the responses of teacher candidates and their performance on assignment, it appears that teacher candidates made significant movement towards understanding, articulating, and implementing Indigagogy. Most significant, based on our analysis of the data, is that we were able to engage them in thinking and reflecting deeply about their identity, Aboriginal culture, and teaching to make the world a better place. This was mainly due to taking time to engage teacher candidates in re-visioning through Aboriginal ceremony. Trusting the power of experience and of relationship, we created a safe and culturally rich space in which they could open themselves up to learning. Their receptivity to the smudging ceremony and the connections they made to the spiritual aspects of the Medicine Wheel, as an important component in this process, by requesting a daily smudging ceremony suggest that many teachers and learners can be reached through the

door of culture and shared ceremonies. At the end of the course, teacher candidates “dressed” (decorated with beads and leather) a talking feather to use in their classrooms. They found this to be a powerful symbol of their learning in the course. One reflected, that it was a “very special gift that we will all keep and remember about this class” indicates that the learning was deep and personal, as well as factual and practical. While they may not use all the activities, there was a sense that teacher candidates were changed by the experience, which was far more than we could have expected as their instructors.

From an analysis of course data, it is clear that there was significant individual change related to learning outcomes. Teacher candidates demonstrated:

- An enhanced knowledge base in regard to authentic Indigenous history, ceremony, effects of the residential school system, challenges for Indigenous students, community practices, and successful existing programs;
- A deeper appreciation for Indigenous concepts of teaching and learning (Indigagogy);
- The ability to create appropriate and respectful strategies to integrate Indigenous perspectives into mainstream classrooms;
- The ability to use their knowledge of holistic Indigenous pedagogy for the benefit of all students.

Aboriginal education needs to be about more than knowledge and intellectual understanding. Learning factual information alone is insufficient for real change to occur in the classroom. Critical examination of accepted pedagogy can be threatening, and yet it is only at that fundamental level that indigenizing education is possible. Indigenizing education requires that teachers let down their guard and risk looking at the world through a different lens. Our action research project taught us that visioning and relating through ceremony can result in profound learning for teachers prepared to open up their hearts and minds. .

John Hodson (2012) recently highlighted the importance of moving beyond superficial changes to fundamental transformation in the way teachers relate to Aboriginal students and communities:

We have come as far as we can in regard to remediating the alarming drop-out rate of Aboriginal students within the Ontario school system. We have come as far as we can with powwows and pictures on the walls. It is time now to address the change needed in teacher education. Since 2007 and the introduction of the First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework the emphasis of change has been on getting Aboriginal cultures into Ontario schools. The result has been more iconography on the walls, paw wows at schools, Elder in class, and these are important inclusions because kids need to literally see positive representations of themselves normalized in their school experiences, but the greatest determinant of Aboriginal academic success will always be the teacher. If we are to meet the educational needs of

our kids all teachers—pre-service and in-service—must be educated to be bi-epistemic practitioners capable of working through a culturally responsive pedagogy of relations. Make no mistake this will be the most difficult educational landscape that will have to be crossed before we see significant changes in the drop-out rates of our kids. (Hodson, personal communication, May 21, 2012).

Our experiences with this course lead us to share Hudson's belief in the transformative potential of teachers to indigenize the teaching and learning. We have identified three sources of strength moving forward. The first is collaboration between mainstream and Indigenous instructors to make change happen now in our schools and universities. The second lies in the expertise and willingness of Indigenous Elders, experts, students, and community members to assist us in this work. The third is the openness of aspiring teachers, who may be open to Indigenizing their practice when they are approached using all four parameters of the Medicine Wheel.

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BIOGRAPHICAL NOTE:

Dr. Julian Kitchen is an Associate Professor of Education at Brock University. His research interests include Aboriginal education, teacher education, LGBT issues in education, and the self-study of teacher education practices. He is lead author of *Professionalism, Law and the Ontario Educator* and editor of *Brock Education: A Journal of Educational Research and Practice*.

Margaret Raynor, M.Ed. coordinates Brock University's Bachelor of Education P/J, Sioux Lookout. Her research interests include Aboriginal pedagogy and innovation in delivery of distance education.
