

## **RESPONDING TO THE CALLS TO ACTION: REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING MANDATORY INDIGENOUS EDUCATION TO TEACHER CANDIDATES IN ONTARIO**

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Article abstract

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## RESPONDING TO THE CALLS TO ACTION: REFLECTIONS ON TEACHING MANDATORY INDIGENOUS EDUCATION TO TEACHER CANDIDATES IN ONTARIO

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**ABSTRACT.** Drawing on reflexive conversations, we describe our experiences teaching a new mandatory course in Indigenous education at Western University in London, Ontario. By discussing the successes, challenges, and mistakes made while teaching this course, we hope to continue to decolonize our practice as settlers, PhD students, and educators with the goal of working towards reconciliation in education and society.

**RÉPONDRE AUX APPELS À L'ACTION : RÉFLEXIONS SUR L'ENSEIGNEMENT D'UN COURS OBLIGATOIRE EN ÉDUCATION AUTOCHTONE OFFERT AUX FUTURS ENSEIGNANTS EN ONTARIO**

**RÉSUMÉ.** S'appuyant sur des discussions réflexives, nous décrivons notre expérience d'enseignement d'un nouveau cours obligatoire portant sur l'éducation autochtone et offert à l'Université Western, en Ontario. En partageant les succès vécus, les défis rencontrés et les erreurs faites pendant l'enseignement de ce cours, nous espérons poursuivre la décolonisation de notre pratique en tant que colonisateurs, doctorants et éducateurs, dans le but de contribuer à la réconciliation dans le domaine de l'éducation et dans la société.

Throughout the six volumes of *The Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada*, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC, 2015) identified glaring gaps in the education of non-Indigenous Canadians regarding Indigenous perspectives and experiences, particularly the residential school system. These TRC findings call for both age-appropriate curriculum

and teacher training, supports, and resources for the K-12 and post-secondary sectors (TRC, 2015). People for Education (2016), a not-for-profit organization that advocates for public education in Ontario, identifies this “knowledge gap” as “the lack of knowledge about the history, cultures, and perspectives of Indigenous peoples in Canada,” which can be improved through programming, resources, and professional learning activities for educators (p. 1). The Association of Canadian Deans of Education (ACDE, 2010) has also recognized that faculties of education have a “responsibility to expand educators’ knowledge about and understanding of Indigenous education” (p. 2). In addition, the professional regulatory body for educators in Ontario, where both authors are qualified to teach, the Ontario College of Teachers (OCT), recognizes the need for teacher training specifically focused on integrating Indigenous content. In its *Accreditation Resource Guide*, a companion to the *Ontario College of Teachers Act* (1996), the OCT (2017) suggested that teacher training programs “ensure that candidates recognize their responsibility to educate all students in their classrooms [about] Indigenous histories, cultures, perspectives and ways of knowing as important within the Ontario context in which all students are living and learning” (p. 33). Similarly, the Ontario Ministry of Education’s (2007) framework document for its Indigenous Education Strategy identified that all students are expected to learn about Indigenous peoples’ histories, cultures, and perspectives, what we refer to throughout our Notes as Indigenous education.

While the need for training and professional development about Indigenous peoples and histories has been made clear, and while Bachelor of Education programs in Ontario have been extended to two years, teacher education programs are required to deliver mandatory Indigenous content (Ontario, 2016), but not specific Indigenous education courses (People for Education, 2016). Western University in London, Ontario, however, recently responded to these calls to support teacher training in this area through the introduction of a mandatory course, previously offered as an elective. The Bachelor of Education program in Ontario is a two-year post-graduate degree in which graduates become qualified to teach in specific grade divisions (i.e. primary / junior, junior / intermediate, or intermediate / senior). The course, titled, “Aboriginal Education: Toward a Decolonizing Pedagogy for Teachers,” is a multi-section, required course for all teacher candidates in Year One of the program starting in 2016-2017. The course has broad ranging, multiple, and critical learning objectives, which include teaching about Canada’s colonial history and contemporary issues facing Indigenous communities, alongside more “practical” teacher training concerns such as culturally relevant and appropriate instructional strategies, and the location and vetting of suitable resources.

These Notes from the Field reflect just a few of the personal, epistemological, and pedagogical considerations that arose during our time teaching this course. These notes developed through a process of “kitchen table reflexivity” where we came together “through informal conversations” to “critically and reflexively

engage with the fluidity of [our] positionalities” (Kohl & McCutcheon, 2015, p. 748). Following Kohl and McCutcheon (2015), we engaged in “everyday talk” as a cathartic process wherein we discussed, questioned, bragged, complained, contemplated, collaborated, and more, all the while centering the ways in which our positionalities influenced our teaching and learning. These Notes from the Field discuss the complexities of instructing the course, our attempts to have our work contribute to the process of reconciliation, what worked as well as where we struggled. It is our hope that by making our teaching practice public in these Notes from the Field, our work may assist others’ learning, teaching, and engaging with Indigenous perspectives in teacher education.

A note, then, is needed about who we are and how we came to be instructors for this course. We are non-Indigenous women who identify as white settlers and are currently PhD candidates at the same Faculty of Education. We were also, during the 2016-2017 academic year, instructors in the same teacher education program. Kaitlyn’s research is concerned with understandings of reconciliation among educators following a TRC-inspired event held in south-western Ontario. Natalie’s work is focused on the perspectives of in-service teachers about Ontario’s Indigenous education policy and its impact, or lack thereof, on their practice, classrooms, and schools. We are both interested in the ways reconciliation and decolonization are being supported and/or inhibited by education in Ontario. We understand decolonization to be an ongoing process that involves both personal or internal processes (TRC, 2015), along with more formalized external changes within society (i.e., changes to institutions, structures, etc., Battiste, 2013).

As PhD candidates, Bachelor of Education instructors, and new scholars, we agree with the position taken by the ACDE which advocates for collaborative and focused efforts that support transformational education in the area of Indigenous education that critiques the “status quo” and moves away from deficit reasoning around the achievement “gaps” which persist between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students (ACDE, 2010, p. 2). We also recognize the important role and responsibility teacher training has to play in “expand[ing] educators’ knowledge about and understanding of Indigenous education” (ACDE, 2010, p. 2) so as to address the education gap (People for Education, 2016; Pratt & Danyluk, 2017) that exists between the knowledge necessary to support efforts towards reconciliation and decolonization of education (Battiste, 2013), and the status quo. Perhaps most importantly, we acknowledge our own deficits, as settlers, but are hopeful that our writing may contribute to the forging of a new relationship – that by making public the successes, and, essentially, the mistakes we made in our classes – we can improve our own practice, include others in the discussion, and participate in moves toward reconciliation.

## THE COURSE

Embracing the TRC's Calls to Action for education, with our own philosophies of education rooted in the need for decolonization (Battiste, 2013) and appreciation of critical pedagogy (Freire, 1970/1993), we set out to prepare teacher candidates for the process of "unsettling." For Regan (2010), this requires "interacting differently with Indigenous people – with vulnerability, humility, and a willingness to stay in the decolonizing struggle of our own discomfort" (p. 13). Based on our readings of Regan, among others, we understand unsettling to include personal, epistemological disruption, which we hoped to initiate among our teacher candidates. Based on Kaitlyn's experiences as a student in a similar course, and for both Natalie and Kaitlyn through conversations with other teacher educators, we anticipated that many of our students would need to be made aware of Canada's colonial past and present, and the legacies that bear witness to them. More importantly, they would need to critically consider the ways their own lives intersect with the legacies and ongoing processes of colonialism – their privilege, their own marginalization, their complicity, and their resistance. In order to join and encourage them on this journey, we generally focused on content exploring Canada's existence as a colonial entity as a foundation for the course, with the goal of "upsetting [students'] investment in seeing Canada as a fair, generous, and tolerant nation" (Cannon, 2011, p. 21). We did so with hopes that students would begin to develop the skills and understanding necessary to facilitate the respectful and responsible use of practical strategies and resources in their future classrooms.

Using the Ontario Ministry of Education's (2007) *Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework (Framework)*, the policy document informing Indigenous education in the province, we attempted to garner buy in from our students about their professional obligation for teaching all students about Indigenous peoples' histories, cultures, and perspectives, and for supporting Indigenous student learning. In Kaitlyn's classes, personal connections were secured among some students by asking them to identify and research the treaty that covers their hometown, in areas where land has been ceded through treaty, or the geographic area where they hope to teach. Many were unaware of treaties or their role in settler occupation of traditional Indigenous territory. Natalie facilitated personal connections for some students through a writing activity about students' personal teaching philosophies and treaty knowledge, alongside a class discussion about why they thought they were being required to take an Aboriginal education course and how they felt about it. Overall, we encouraged our students to make connections with the course through the acknowledgement that "we are all Treaty people who share responsibility for taking action on reconciliation" (TRC, 2015, p. 7). It is also noteworthy that we acknowledged that some land in Canada has not been ceded through treaty negotiation and asked students to explore issues concerning these circumstances.

All course sections followed the same course syllabus, but we each approached content and instruction in pedagogically different ways. Our process of unsettling, in covering Canada's colonial context and our individual and collective relationships to it, promoted a process of deconstruction which focused on critiquing the beliefs and assumptions students held about education and Indigenous peoples. To a lesser extent, we explored pedagogical implications for teaching Indigenous students, because, as Ontario's *Framework* (2007) makes clear, Indigenous education is for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. In our own versions of the course, we covered residential schools, namely the ongoing legacy and intergenerational trauma, and language and identity formation, including the role language has to play in cultural preservation. Through our engagement with Indigenous communities and the works of Indigenous scholars, we recognized respect as an important component of teaching and learning in the area of Indigenous education more specifically. As such, both Natalie and Kaitlyn worked to model respectful pedagogies in their classes: that is, the demonstration and respect for students' knowledges, perspectives, and decision-making. This flexibility allowed each instructor to frame issues through a particular lens: for Kaitlyn, through treaty responsibilities and settler complicity in our current colonial context, and Natalie, through attempts to create a space for teacher candidates to acknowledge their positionality and challenge settler colonial logics (Wolfe, 2006). In our discussions throughout, and after the end of the course, three themes emerged: competing priorities; students' fear, anxiety, and/or complacency; and the impact of time constraints on our programming.

### COMPETING PRIORITIES

Competing priorities between instructor and students manifested in the content that we covered, notwithstanding limits imposed by the shared course syllabus, how much time we spent on particular areas, and our capacity to meet student requests. We both needed to balance providing students with the practical tools to take up Indigenous content in their practice and providing them with the necessary background knowledge and skills to take up this work in responsible and ethical ways. As settler women, we felt most knowledgeable about settler complicity and the ways in which colonialism has impacted the relationship between Indigenous peoples and settlers; therefore, we spent much of our time covering this area. In contrast, students appeared to be preoccupied with "the cultural other" and "how to 'deal with' the other in the classroom" (St. Denis & Schick, 2003, p. 78, emphasis in original). For example, students were particularly interested in hearing about or from the local First Nation communities, with specific requests for a guest speaker. While we appreciate the value of guest speakers for understanding cultural context, we felt that it was first necessary to focus on understanding settler responsibility for colonialism and its impacts on Indigenous communities. We also recognized that as

our students emerged from the program, they would be spread out across the province, and therefore, needed to seek out information about their specific teaching contexts and the communities they would serve. Both of us, however, provided detailed information about the First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Leads now required in each school board (Ontario Ministry of Education, 2016) and stressed the importance of connecting with them, but acknowledge this as a serious limitation of our course design.

In the classroom, priorities between the instructor and students differed in that both of our groups of students were insistent on acquiring tangible resources they could use in their classrooms. Teacher candidates frequently asked for prepared lesson plans or kits. In understanding this course as the beginning of the work set before them, we instead took time to focus on the lack of inclusion or biased content about Indigenous peoples in curriculum, the deficit perspective perpetuated in the media and resources about Indigenous peoples, and strategies for assessing resources that they could use with their students. By doing so, we hoped these future teachers would gain skills necessary to adequately implement programming, wherever it may come from and in whatever form.

We also found competing priorities at an institutional level. While the Bachelor of Education program now includes a nine-week course dedicated to “Aboriginal education” and “decolonizing pedagogy” (terms used in the course titles), we question how much these topics are a priority at an institutional level. We ask, is decolonizing or unsettling content integrated across all courses? Our status as PhD student labour also raised concerns about our own priorities, and the ways being both commuter students and instructors impacted our capacities in the course, namely our ability to make the important and necessary steps to build relationships with the local communities which we consider to be an important component of working in Indigenous education. Finally, we recognize that our students, as individuals with their own relationships and responsibilities, necessarily prioritized their courses and assignments in a variety of ways. Thus, students often came to class unprepared, not having read the assigned texts. Both instructors also experienced instances where students clearly communicated that they understood the work of their other classes as more valuable than the work done in our classes, specifically the creation of lesson plans in their subject teachable classes. These competing priorities were a challenge for negotiating our next theme: students’ fear, anxiety, and complacency.

### **FEAR, ANXIETY, AND/OR COMPLACENCY**

By asking students to step out of their comfort zones, we were prepared for expressions of fear and anxiety. Our groups of predominantly self-identified non-Indigenous students admitted their lack of understanding and fear of the

course content in introductory activities designed to help us get to know our students. While “defensive anger, fear of change, and fears of losing [one’s] personal and cultural identities” (Boler, 1999, p. 176) are common reactions when students are asked to examine their beliefs and assumptions, we observed that some students embraced this fear and anxiety and critically engaged with the material and their own positionalities. This sometimes came in the form of requests for additional information and resources, or reaching out for advice on how to integrate specific components in their placements following the course. In other instances, some students retreated and spent time in class on their laptops, tablets, and/or phones in non-course-based activities, despite having collaboratively developed classroom expectations at the beginning of the course that teacher candidates were to use their devices respectfully. Observing students’ fear and anxiety brought up anxiety in us as settlers, students, and instructors which we worked through together in our kitchen table discussions so that we could best serve our students, and our own needs.

Having dedicated our graduate work and aspects of our personal lives to the field of Indigenous education, and specifically the role of non-Indigenous educators in contributing to efforts of reconciliation through education, complacency was a lesser expected reaction to course learning. Complacency was expressed in two ways: by those who thought they had done the necessary work of the course because they had taken an Indigenous Studies course in their undergraduate program, and others who were simply uninterested in engaging with the material of the course at all, which might also be described as resistance. These student reactions required us to shift our approaches so that we better incorporated students’ emotions into the planning process and the strategies we used to engage students in the classroom. In doing so, we attempted to target lessons and activities on a more individual level, seeking out resources and connections specific to students’ teachable areas, locations, and past experiences. For example, towards the end of the course, both instructors prepared “resource fairs” so that students could interact with specific resources (i.e., lesson plans, books, activity kits) targeted at specific divisions or teachable subjects. Such efforts succeeded in gaining enthusiasm from some resistant students, however, complacency and resistance remained a problematic presence in our classes.

## TIME (AND OTHER) CONSTRAINTS

Both “competing priorities” and feelings of “fear, anxiety, and complacency” are wrapped in the issue of time: a) how could we cover all the content necessary to meet the goals of this course in nine weeks; b) how could we meet the needs of all types of students, in large classes, with different teachable subjects in different division levels; and c) how could we promote lifelong unsettling learning among our teacher candidates in the little time we had with them? We found that a lack of time prevented us from engaging in the difficult, yet



crucial work, of coming face-to-face with one's discomfort, fear, and anxiety about the content. We often found ourselves exposing students to new ideas, and then packing up the class and moving onto a new topic the next week. Students also indicated they felt rushed in activities and, at times, some displayed frustration about having to cover so much content in so little time. We left the course feeling as though we introduced important concepts to our students that could contribute to decolonizing their practice, but also that it would be prudent to see them again next year to continue developing their knowledge and skills. Ultimately, the course feels like an unfinished project.

## OUR LEARNING

Following our kitchen table reflexive discussions, we, with another of our teaching colleagues from the course, were fortunate enough to share our experiences at a province-wide forum on education as a response to the TRC's Calls to Action. These ongoing, collaborative, and critical discussions offer important opportunities to position our practice for the constructive criticism of others in our field. We appreciate these opportunities and recognize the important role they play in enabling us to interrogate our approaches so that we continuously improve our practice and better understand our role as settler educators in Indigenous education.

These Notes from the Field have called attention to the complex nature of implementing the TRC's Calls to Action on education for reconciliation by focusing on a specific Bachelor of Education course in Ontario dedicated to "decolonizing education." With institutions and specific programs across the province and country looking for ways to embed the Calls to Action in their programming, despite the Ontario government's recent cancellation of curriculum revisions based on Indigenous histories, cultures, and perspectives, careful consideration must be given to implementation plans and the long-term sustainability of such activities. In our experience, the course discussed above was often the teacher candidates' first exposure to the concepts of decolonization and Indigenous education, which required significant intellectual and tangible resourcing to meet students' needs. Furthermore, we recommend that such efforts have a clear purpose or learning goal(s) so that all levels of implementation (i.e., administration, faculty, students) understand why such activities are necessary.

We found that competing priorities; students' fear, anxiety, and complacency; and constraints of time and other factors led to challenges in our classrooms that impacted the content we covered, our pedagogical approaches, and certainly our understandings of what it means to be settler instructors of such a course. We suggest that a single course alone does little to address Battiste's (2013) second prong of decolonized education — a reconstruction embedded with Indigenous ways of knowing and being — which we envision as a vital

component of our work. We also recognize that this course asks our teacher candidates to develop a decolonizing pedagogy in a colonial system, which presents challenges for educational change at an operational level (i.e., school calendar, grading, etc.). However, we reiterate that such a course must be understood as the beginning of these educators' responsibility for decolonizing their practice, and ultimately their lives, and that ongoing efforts must be made, individually and collectively in programs and learning institutions, to achieve the goal of meaningful reconciliatory learning for students and teachers.

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