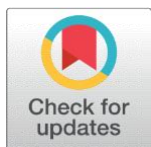




Acting on the TRC Calls to Action Through Education

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Yvonne Poitras Pratt

I am an Associate Professor and UofC Research Excellence Chair at the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary. I am a citizen of Otipemisawak (Métis Nation of Alberta) who traces her ancestral roots to Red River and more recently to Fishing Lake Métis Settlement in northeastern Alberta, Canada. My ultimate goal is to nurture improved relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples through formal and informal learning pathways. My 2020 book, *Digital Storytelling in Indigenous Education: A Decolonizing Journey for a Metis Community*, shares a firsthand account of working with Métis settlement members on a series of intergenerational digital stories. These are now shared as free resources with educators and lifelong learners. As an award-winning educator who wishes to “know better to do better,” I have entered reconciliatory studies with humility fueled by a sense of urgency. I find solace and restoration avoiding coyotes on Nose Hill Park with my fur-friend, Noki.

Patricia J. Danyluk

I am an Associate Professor and Graduate Program Director at the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary. I grew up in northern Manitoba in a community with an urban reserve, the Nisichawayasihk Cree Nation on Treaty 5 land. I am currently a settler on Treaty 7 land who has worked with Indigenous communities in Manitoba, Ontario and Alberta. I am also a K-12 teacher who spent the early part of my career working with the most remote Indigenous communities in Manitoba. In my work, I attempt to model how non-Indigenous educators can work alongside Indigenous peoples to further reconciliation. I believe that the work of reconciliation should be shared. I have been working in the area of pre-service teacher education for over 20 years. My research interests include the practicum, critical service learning, online teaching, reconciliation and anti-Indigenous racism. Outside of work, I enjoy my four dogs and hiking in the mountains.

Keywords Reconciliation education, Indigenous Education, Anti-Racism Education, Preservice Teachers, Reconciliation Model

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INTRODUCTION

The power of education to shape how people think about the world, and their place within it, has long been recognized. It is no wonder then that education was used as a primary tool to enact the colonialist agenda across the lands now known as Canada, and around the world (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2012). In learning the ways that education was used as a destructive, and deadly, force against the most vulnerable of all - Indigenous children - we, as teacher educators, are committed to learning more about how we might use education as a positive force for social change and betterment. As teacher educators working in a large post-secondary setting, we believe in the shared work of reconciliation through education: Yvonne is an active citizen of the Métis Nation of Alberta and a scholar, and Patricia is a settler-ally with a strong background in adult education who has worked with Indigenous communities in Alberta, Ontario, and Manitoba. In 2016, Patricia approached Yvonne to partner on a Teaching Scholars initiative at the University of Calgary focused on building connections between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, communities, and schools. We were awarded funds to take up this scholarship of teaching and learning project over a three-year period.

THE RESEARCH

Our Teaching Scholars project was designed as a multi-pronged approach to building improved relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples recognizing the scope and complexities inherent in decolonizing and Indigenous efforts. We proposed working with our education students at the undergraduate and graduate level, reaching out to faculties beyond education to extend the scope of our educational practices, sharing what we learned with fellow educators at a variety of post-secondaries, and finally, offering lessons learned with those communities and organizations interested in the work of reconciliation at a more grassroots level. It was an ambitious project design. We gathered reflection data from pre-service teachers volunteering in on-reserve schools around Calgary; we dialogued and shared insights with faculty members across campus; we said ‘yes’ to almost every invitation we received from not-for-profit organizations and learning groups; and we gathered student feedback through a World Cafe event on the “Indigenous education: A call to action” program (focusing on TRC Calls 62 to 65 specific to education). While many of the groups who reached out to us were comprised of non-Indigenous peoples (including settler and newcomers), we deliberately involved Indigenous and non-Indigenous faculty, graduate students, and nearby reserve communities in our activities.

FINDINGS & IMPLICATIONS

By plunging into the unknown, and often contested, waters of reconciliation, we have gained [a number of key lessons](#) that we now share with you, in the spirit of reciprocity, in hopes that you will help us further refine and extend this necessary work. The first, and most significant, lesson is this: *challenge yourself to venture into the learning*. There is never going to be the absolutely perfect opportunity or right time to take up this work: what really matters is your willingness to move from apathy to action. Our [Approaches to Reconciliation model](#) offered three entry points into this work: listening to and learning from, walking with and learning from, and working with and learning from (see Figure 1 below; Poitras Pratt & Danyluk, 2019). Our belief is there is room for everyone, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, and no matter what stage of learning you are at, in taking up individual responsibilities to enact reconciliatory actions. [Colonial schooling affected all learners](#). Those new to the learning may want to engage in more private acts of listening to and learning from Indigenous perspectives while those who have gained some foundational understandings may feel ready to walk beside and continue learning alongside Indigenous peoples. These entry points both prioritize listening and learning yet moving your support and advocacy from the private to the public realm can feel like a leap. The more complex working with and learning from Indigenous peoples stage requires advanced skills and [is best taken up by those who hold, or are willing to acquire, the requisite expertise and experience](#).

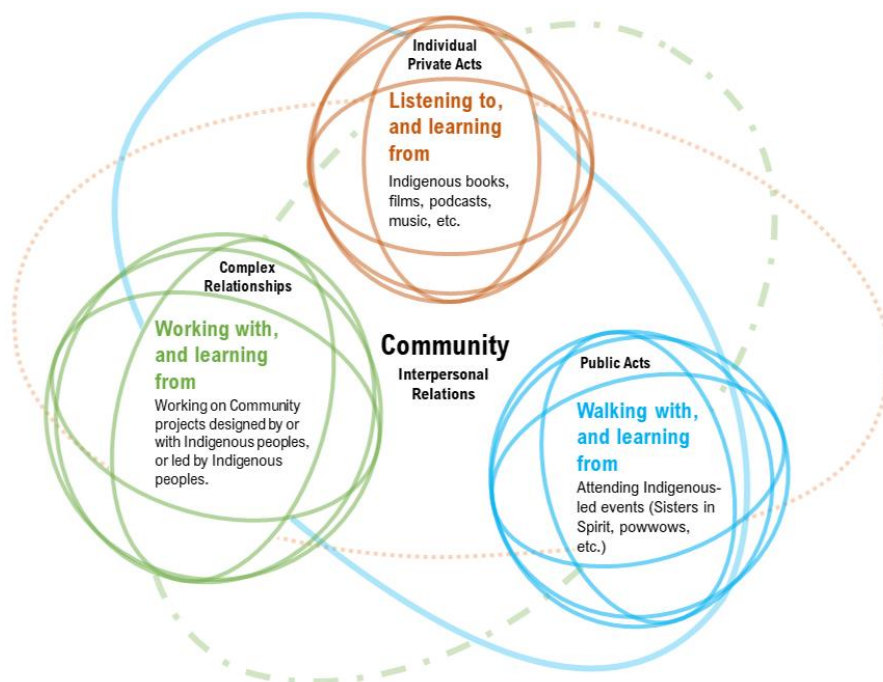


Figure 1: Approaches to Reconciliation Model (original artwork, K. Gladue, 2022)

We developed this model early on in our scholarship as a way to help others see their way into this often intimidating work. Those new to this learning terrain are strongly encouraged to take up the responsibility of learning basic knowledge, specific to their local context, on their own. It is not fair or right to place that burden on Indigenous peoples who have already suffered many injustices and are now being asked to fill others' learning gaps. There is an incredible wealth of resources around Indigenous perspectives, both online and in community settings, waiting to be discovered. Be critically cautious about what resources you are taking up as the 'truth' and ask others for guidance when you are not sure - the only dumb questions are the ones not asked. In other words, the adoption of humility in this learning space is a necessity as is the need to ethically position yourself within the work. What we have also found is that learners benefit from learning basic social justice concepts prior to entering the work of reconciliation through education.

The 2017 book *Is Everyone Really Equal?: An Introduction to Key Concepts in Social Justice Education* by Özlem Sensoy and Robin DiAngelo is an excellent place to start. Since learners have unique learning needs and circumstances, start with learning materials that you are drawn to and that motivate your learning: audio-books are an excellent option for those who like to multi-task (Poitras Pratt, 2022); art galleries visually present Indigenous perspectives; and the performance arts can generate immersive learning. The growing body of literature by Indigenous authors remains a popular and accessible mode of learning (see Werklund's [Books to build On](#) website). You will want to explore educational resources created by First Nations, Métis, and Inuit national, provincial, and local organizations.¹ As you gain more knowledge, experiential learning within this context represents a unique form of relational and transformative learning.

¹ Just as there are issues around academics who are claiming Indigenous ancestry without meeting appropriate criteria such as community belongingness, so too are there rogue organizations who are not recognized at the federal level. The Métis National Council, for instance, includes the following authorized homeland organizations only: Métis Nation of British Columbia, Métis Nation of Alberta, Métis Nation of Saskatchewan, and the Métis Nation of Ontario. The Manitoba Métis Federation has recently opted to stand on its own.

PRACTICAL IMPLICATIONS FOR TEACHERS

One of the things we hear most often from our pre-service teachers, even after carefully guiding them through a number of Indigenous resources and modeling Indigenous pedagogies (Hanson & Danyluk, 2022; Louie, et al., 2017; Louie & Poitras Pratt, forthcoming), is that inviting an Elder into their classroom is their go-to solution for “all things Indigenizing.” This is problematic for a few reasons. The first being, the teacher is off-loading responsibility for integrating Indigenous perspectives into their own teaching onto a group of people who have borne decades of injustices. Not only can these requests exceed the Indigenous Elders and/or knowledge-keepers available to meet this demand but this need can easily surpass dedicated school funding; the latter points to systemic issues at the level of provincial ministries responsible for education funding. On that note, be wisely aware that your provincial curriculum may not be as value-neutral and objective as you might think (see, <https://alberta-curriculum-analysis.ca/social-studies/>).

As Indigenous and allied educators who are committed to teaching and modeling Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing, we have continually refined the mandatory Indigenous education course in our own learning setting. Honouring the Indigenous call for “nothing about us, without us,” a core group of Indigenous faculty created this course in 2013 and conducted research around its delivery (Poitras Pratt & Hanson, 2020). Since then, this initial group of educators has expanded to include allied educators who are committed to reconciliation and respectful of prioritizing Indigenous values and knowledge traditions thereby modeling the building of good relations. In thinking about how you might bring these ideas into your classroom, look to articles on decolonizing and Indigenizing from a wide variety of teaching and learning contexts to see what is already out there.

The Indigenous authors of [Applying Indigenizing principles of decolonizing methodologies in university classrooms](#) drew on Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith’s 25 decolonizing projects to demonstrate how you can deepen your classroom teaching and learning beyond a content-only approach that is respectful of Indigenous principles. Teachers should look to their Indigenous education team for guidance around wise practices in this regard. Some Indigenous organizations, including the Métis Nation of Alberta, have started to create their own [educational resources](#) in a bid for self-determination (Poitras Pratt & Lalonde, 2019). The [Gabriel Dumont Institute](#) in Saskatchewan is an exemplar for what is possible given requisite provincial support. The point here is that Indigenous community organizations serve as the authority for producing foundational knowledge about their own people and communities.

In closing, teachers have to consider their own responsibility for this learning versus the long-term implications for not taking up this learning as part of their professional practice. The past several years have shown us that truth-telling is a [cornerstone of academic integrity and respectful relations within an Indigenous context](#). Coming full circle, we ask you to consider which entry point from our Approaches to Reconciliation model is your starting point and encourage you to begin this journey for the betterment of our shared future.

Q & A WITH YVONNE POITRAS PRATT & PATRICIA J. DANYLUK

Question #1

Teacher’s Question:

Could you unpack what the life-long journey of becoming an “ally” might look like, and in what ways can we better differentiate that from the privilege and lateral violence that can come from those with “good intentions?”

Yvonne Poitras Pratt & Patricia J. Danyluk’s Response:

As teacher educators, we rely on scholarship such as Sensoy and DiAngelo, as well as Paulette Regan’s *Unsettling the Settler Within* (2010) to help guide us, and aspiring allies, in thinking about ethical teaching and learning practices. Our recent publication, [Truth and reconciliation through education: Stories of decolonizing practices \(2023\)](#), explores the journeys of multiple allies who have gained valuable insights based on their critical service-learning projects enacted in our Call to Action graduate certificate program. The stories from the Indigenous alumni of this program hold similarly valuable lessons around the complexities of decolonizing within a previously unquestioned educational system. Finally, we hold frank and open conversations with one another on points of difference as we realize we often come with different perspectives on the same topic.

Question #2**Teacher's Question:**

I understand that we don't want to overburden Elders but recognize that there are times when it may be the best practice to call upon them. Are there situations or reasons you would support a non-Indigenous K-12 educator calling on an Elder or Traditional Knowledge Keeper to Indigenize their or their school's teaching and learning practices?

Yvonne Poitras Pratt & Patricia J. Danyluk's Response:

There are many reasons why K-12 educators may seek the expertise of Indigenous Elders or Knowledge-Keepers; the breadth (or longevity) and depth (severity) of the situation should be key considerations. For instance, the decision to Indigenize or decolonize an entire school or district requires careful planning and the respectful involvement of Indigenous Elders (or knowledge-keepers) to help guide this transformative work. This involvement requires appropriate compensation and also full consideration of the structural changes that are required to make meaningful change. In the case of individual teachers seeking Elders' involvement either in their classroom or at the school-wide level, we would suggest reaching out to your Indigenous education team for support or, if this is not an option available to you, then approaching leadership (whether that is your principal or district leadership) or your colleagues to relay your needs and interests. You may be asking a question that others may be wondering about but have not had the courage to ask. You might also want to approach your provincial Teachers' Association to ask for guidance and support if you are feeling overwhelmed.

Question #3**Teacher's Question:**

This article addresses the teacher, but at what point do we call on the systemic issues of the school board to establish a standard of achievement and resources? I am thinking about the role of Indigenous specialists/consultants who can help to ensure authentic and purposeful education is taking place routinely.

Yvonne Poitras Pratt & Patricia J. Danyluk's Response:

We recognize that the work of Indigenizing and decolonizing requires systemic and structural shifts from the provincial ministries of education, alongside district superintendents, to become truly successful. The Ministry of Education sets the curriculum and professional standards for teachers, including Teaching Quality Standard 5, and these are the bases upon which our schooling systems ought to be setting standards and achievement criteria. Policies, resources, and supports must be in place to successfully implement policies into meaningful change.

In the case of Alberta Teaching Quality Standards 2018 (specifically TQS 5 that relates to Indigenous education), all teachers are responsible for applying foundational knowledges of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples in their classroom teaching. It is essential that teachers have timely and ready access to Indigenous specialists who work within the school district and who possess authentic community connections to Elders and knowledge keepers to be successful. That said, a central issue is that there are simply not enough Indigenous educators to meet the high demand and needs of practicing and pre-service teachers.

A suitable number of Indigenous specialists need to be in long-term stable positions where these positions do not fluctuate with economic and political shifts particularly as the premise of Indigenous teaching and learning is relational. A constant turnover of Indigenous specialists erodes the basis of trust and good relations.

Question #4**Teacher's Question:**

How should teachers address the curriculum that vaguely and often haphazardly refers to Indigenous ways of knowing and learning when they may not feel adequately prepared or supported to do so?

Yvonne Poitras Pratt & Patricia J. Danyluk's Response:

Providing a curriculum that is both well thought out and respectful of Indigenous ways would be an ideal place to start but [when this process is less than perfect](#), than teachers are placed in the role of trying to make sense and good lessons out of the curriculum that has been set in place by provincial authorities. Ideally, Indigenous educators and knowledge-keepers trained in the education profession would be contributing their expertise from the curriculum building process through to supporting classroom teachers on a regular and ongoing basis with appropriate supports in place to mitigate against exhaustion and burn-out. There are a number of risks inherent in a curriculum that is either colonially biased or inadequate in representing Indigenous perspectives. The first risk is that teachers will simply avoid the teaching of Indigenous perspectives. Teachers fear making mistakes and, without the right supports in place to address these fears, they may shy away from this work, or some may even grow resentful. This is where Indigenous learning specialists are essential supports. Teachers can learn to navigate problematic curriculum by checking their ideas around lesson planning with Indigenous specialists where they can receive expert feedback and support. Secondly, we need to provide meaningful and ongoing learning opportunities for teachers to gain foundational knowledge around First Nations, Métis, and Inuit peoples so that they can start to identify the curricular gaps themselves. We have found that forming a like-minded community of practice and/or learning, with either colleagues or community members, can help to address some of these risks. Once again, seek out appropriate resources and educational experts to help navigate some of these risks.

Question #5**Teacher's Question:**

What are the implications for teaching and learning when teachers may avoid teaching Indigenous content, peoples, ways of knowing, traditions, culture, values, or histories because they are concerned about engaging in lateral violence or (re)traumatization?

Yvonne Poitras Pratt & Patricia J. Danyluk's Response:

In an Alberta context, teachers can no longer avoid teaching Indigenous content, peoples, ways of knowing, traditions, culture, values, or histories as they are evaluated based on their adherence to professional standards (TQS). This is the type of policy that is necessary across North America in order to spark systemic change.

Ultimately, deciding not to teach Indigenous perspectives and ways of knowing, being, and doing is a high risk choice. Many, if not most, of the issues that arise in our contemporary lives around racism and overall apathy from non Indigenous Canadians arise from a general lack of knowing - even the most basic facts – around Indigenous peoples. We have only to look back over [post-WWII history to contemporary times in terms of Indigenous attempts to have others “wake up” to Indigenous realities](#) to see how history repeats itself when those who have the privilege to walk away and ignore this responsibility do just that.

In other words, not teaching these truths has a direct bearing on how the next generation of citizens regards Indigenous peoples: avoiding this teaching means we will replicate current stereotypes and racism against Indigenous peoples, while teaching difficult truths around the impacts of colonialism ensures the next generation of citizens is well informed, compassionate, and understanding. Being able to call upon an Indigenous specialist reduces the risk of teachers engaging in work that may lead to lateral violence or (re)traumatization.

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