

Decolonizing Our Practice - Indigenizing Our Teaching

Shauneen Pete
University of Regina

Bettina Schneider
First Nations University of Canada

Kathleen O'Reilly
First Nations University of Canada

To be an educator in Saskatchewan is to ask oneself: how do I ensure that all students gain access to respectful and accurate information about First Nations peoples; how do I work to close the achievement gap for First Nations learners? We three university educators are actively engaged in processes to decolonize our practices in higher education. Through our collective narratives we explore how we attempt to decolonize our practice through indigenizing our teaching.

INTRODUCTION

We are three women working together in different programs at a prairie university with an aim of troubling the traditions of the academy. We braid together our teaching narratives as Indigenous and non-Indigenous women and offer them up to you as one example of how we can decolonize our practice and Indigenize our teaching.

THE CONTEXT FOR OUR CONVERSATION

We work in Saskatchewan, a province with a very young and rapidly growing First Nations population. We work in Treaty Four Territory. We work at the University of Regina (U of R) and First Nations University of Canada (FNUniv). The U of R prides itself on the relationships that it has established under the Federated Agreement with FNUniv, Luther and Champion Colleges. This relationship creates space for "...a shared academic purpose" (*U of R, Champion College, Luther College and First Nations University of Canada celebrate longstanding federation agreement*, U of R News Release, March 31, 2009). The U of R is actively moving forward on their strategic plan in part to "Indigenize the University." A part of our shared academic purpose is to

ensure that all students are provided with accurate and authentic information about First Nations & Métis peoples, histories and contemporary issues. We share in the responsibility to ensure that First Nations & Métis people's experiences are reflected and honoured in our relationships, our programs, courses and instructional practices.

As members of the faculty we intend to collaborate in defining, initiating and determining the manner in which indigenizing is actualized. We have been exploring our own identities and what our positioning means about our assumptions and perceptions of our indigenizing practices as we plan for our fall (2012) courses. We began as we often do by engaging in informal conversation about our course planning. This conversation led to a deeper examination of what indigenizing our teaching means for us. Our interpretations of indigenizing emerge as we engage in these conversations. We named this work as both decolonizing and indigenizing our teaching. This paper identifies our working definitions of "Indigenizing our teaching" and describes practical approaches we use in our classrooms.

SITUATING OURSELVES

Shauneen

My name is Dr. Shauneen Pete. I am an educator from Little Pine First Nations (Saskatchewan, Canada). I graduated from the Indian Teacher Education Program (ITEP). The focus of this undergraduate program was to cultivate educators who were culturally competent; who could provide leadership in Indigenous education and who could work towards cultural and linguistic preservation and revitalization. I completed my PhD in Higher Education (Administration) at the University of Arizona. My dissertation examined the manner in which Aboriginal women decolonize their faculty work including their teaching, research and service. I am currently working in the Faculty of Education at the U of R. I teach Aboriginal Education and Education Core Studies (ECS) classes with a focus on social justice and ecological education.

As a First Nations professor, I recognize I am working within an institution (the university) which has served to marginalize and oppress Indigenous peoples, our ways of knowing, and our histories. My aim is to decolonize the academy, in much the same way I have worked to decolonize my faculty work. The foundation for this work is rooted in the undergraduate

training I received in ITEP. I have unapologetically re-centered Indigenous knowledge ways, privileged Indigenous scholars in my resource selections, structured learning activities and designed courses to ensure that my students will learn to teach Indigenous children and youth more effectively. I have had the privilege of working with elders, traditional knowledge keepers, storytellers, and other Indigenous educators. They have each in turn informed, and reaffirmed the approaches that I have chosen for my professional practices.

Bettina

My name is Dr. Bettina Schneider. I am a non-Aboriginal woman (Irish, German, French) from New York currently living in Regina, SK. I moved to California when I was 22 to begin graduate school after being accepted into the Community Development (CD) graduate program at the University of California, Davis. Upon arriving, I began looking for work on campus and was hired as a teaching assistant by the Native American Studies (NAS) Department for an Intro to Native American Studies course¹. This was the first time I had ever been introduced to NAS. I worked as a teaching assistant and began taking courses in the department. I loved what I was learning and eventually was encouraged to apply for the Ph.D. in NAS. It was my dissertation research on Native and Aboriginal Financial Institutions that brought me to Saskatchewan. After working as a teaching assistant at FNUniv, I applied for a position in the School of Business and Public Administration where I am currently an assistant professor.

Kathleen

My name is Dr. Kathleen O'Reilly and I am a non-Aboriginal woman (Irish, Jewish). While I have lived, studied and worked throughout Canada and Europe, Saskatchewan is, and always has been, home. I did my Master's degree in Curriculum at the University of Regina and graduated with my PhD from McGill University in Montreal. I am Professor Emerita from the University of Regina and currently a tenured professor at First Nations University where I teach in the Indigenous education program and graduate classes at the U of R. In 2008-2009, I lived and taught in a Northern Saskatchewan Dene community where I learned first-hand the importance of Indigenizing my teaching and decolonizing my practice.

1 I am so grateful to Dr. Inés Hernández-Avila for giving me this opportunity.

STANDPOINT OF OUR STUDENTS

Shauneen

I had always assumed that I would teach adult learners of First Nations & Métis ancestry. After completing my graduate degree my intention was to work in an Aboriginal institution or at the very least a First Nations program. All of my university teaching has been in mainstream universities. I teach predominantly white, female and middle-class – might I add, heterosexual and Christian, undergraduate students. Our students come from both rural and urban settings. They tell me they grew up with very little racial diversity, except for “that Métis family” or “those First Nations foster children”. I recognize that for many of my students I am the only First Nations educator that they have had. I regularly ask myself, “In what ways can I as a First Nations educator, in the absence of Aboriginal students, Indigenize and decolonize my courses for these mainstream students so that they may serve as allies in their future roles as educators?”

Bettina

When I first began teaching at FNUniv, I assumed that the majority of my students would be First Nations. This assumption is sometimes challenged and often affirmed. Some semesters, I have predominantly First Nations students while other semesters, my classes are largely composed of non-Aboriginal students from Canada and abroad. This varied composition of students presents an incredible opportunity for me to learn how I can most effectively indigenize my business curriculum in order to meet the needs of a diverse audience.

Kathleen

When I taught at the faculty of education at the U of R, similar to Shauneen’s experience, the majority of my students were mostly white, female, heterosexual and middle-class. I was mindful of the need to help teacher candidates meet the needs and interests of the increasing numbers of students from First Nations backgrounds in schools. When I spoke of the importance of incorporating First Nations content, I was often met with resistance and notions that it wouldn’t be necessary because there were few First Nations children at the rural schools where they’d be teaching. Like Bettina, I was surprised by the diversity of the student population at FNUniv. People are often very surprised to hear that “anyone” can attend our programs and that it’s not only for First Nations students.

WHAT DOES INDIGENIZING OUR TEACHING MEAN TO US?

Shauneen

Indigenizing my teaching is about resistance and persistence: resistance to the colonizing tendency to erase First Nations peoples; and doing my part to support the persistence of Indigenous peoples and their ways of knowing. Indigenizing works hand in hand with decolonizing. It's not enough to challenge both "colonial and colonizing curricula," we must also recognize that it's about "affirming the relevance of Indigenous knowledge" (Asabere-Ameyaw, xii). Indigenous ways of knowing for me are informed by lived experience, ceremonial participation, and the works of diverse scholars (Battiste, 2000a; 2000b; Dei, 2011; Reagan, 2005; Cajete, 2000)

Indigenizing education is about re-centering Indigenous knowledge ways in the core of our instructional practices. I view indigenizing my teaching in a holistic way. Indigenizing my teaching is about relationships, curriculum choice, anticipating and correcting racism and it's also about pedagogy.

Bettina

Indigenizing my teaching is about asserting the significance and application of Indigenous knowledge within the subjects I teach. Furthermore, indigenizing is also about decolonizing myself, the classroom, the content I teach and the discipline I operate within by decentering western ways of knowing through the curricula I use. When I first began teaching at FNUniv in 2007, my colleagues encouraged me to incorporate Aboriginal based business cases, exercises and assignments into my courses. While I use these resources every semester, I have come to realize that these curriculum resources, as well as the integration of these resources, have been limited. My training in Native American Studies demands that I critically analyze both my approach to teaching as well as the business content I select in order to enhance the relevance of Indigenous knowing. George Sefa Dei asserts that claiming Indigenous knowledge in the educational system is the promotion of Indigenous education, and to be effective, "such Indigenous education must reflect the political, social, spiritual, as well as pedagogic, instructional and communicative needs and aspirations of Indigenous peoples and their communities" (2011, xii). Claiming Indigenous knowledge in the classroom is about "affirming the relevance of Indigenous knowledge" in the disciplines we teach.

Kathleen

When I began teaching at FNUniv, it was largely because I am *not* First Nations that I was interested in finding ways to indigenize my teaching and decolonize my practice. I am, after all, teaching in an institution that began out of necessity to help support educational aspirations of First Nations students who had not been very successful at the dominant universities because often they were (and still are) lonely, isolating and racist places where they were not welcomed or accepted. Similar to Espikenew (2009), I “realized that all knowledge worth knowing - more specifically, knowledge that my university considered worth teaching – was created by the Greeks, appropriated by the Romans, disseminated throughout western Europe, and through colonialism eventually made its way to the rest of the people of the world, who apparently were sitting on their thumbs waiting for enlightenment.” (p. 1). To decolonize my own teaching practices I decided to confront the question: “how do I create courses which reflect the territory in which I live and work?”

RELATIONSHIPS

Shauneen

The relationships I create with my students have to support developing them as allies. I repeat to them that I need them to remain actively engaged in reforming schooling for the benefit of First Nations and Métis children and youth. I expect them to identify roles for themselves in the process of change. I use a three-part autobiography assignment to better understand who my students are. In the first part of this assignment, students are asked to identify the ways that they learned about race, class and gender in their homes, schools and communities. I want to understand the contexts in which they grew up, and I want to clarify my assumptions about what they have learned. Over the course of my 12 years of teaching at the University my students’ collective narratives have been disturbingly similar: My students come from communities of sameness; they grew up learning very little about Aboriginal peoples, and what they learned was historically based, and limited. They remember low levels of inclusion: “we made dream catchers, heard a storyteller, or saw that movie...” These activities were usually “one-off” activities without a context of pre-teaching that would have provided greater depth of understanding. In their homes and communities

many negative stereotypes about First Nations peoples were enforced. I have come to understand that these students have been structurally denied the opportunity to learn about Aboriginal people because of assumptions that their teachers made about what they as white students would need to know to be successful. I recognize that I must include Indigenous ways of knowing in my curriculum choices in order to correct the absence of these ways of knowing for my students. Without an awareness of and a competency in planning for their inclusion, my students will not be able to effectively incorporate Indigenous content in their own professional practice. I want them to be more effective in this work so that Indigenous learners may not only see themselves reflected in the curriculum, but that all learners may gain access to these ways of knowing which have been denied them structurally. Asabere-Ameyaw asserts “our students must be able to identify with the classroom knowledge in ways that empower, embolden, strengthen and sustain them to become fully engaged in their education” (p. xii). My students must recognize the responsibility they have to ensure curriculum actualization given our provincial Ministry of Learning mandates to close the achievement gap for Indigenous learners in our province. I want my students to gain the competence to do this work so that Indigenous children and youth may thrive in school.

Kathleen

I began my journey with the help and guidance of several Elders. I asked them to help me indigenize my teaching and their advice and stories have shaped me over the years. Over and over, the Elders spoke of the importance of relationship building. I had learned about this first-hand in a Northern Saskatchewan Dene community. Of course, knowing and learning about your students is considered an important aspect of pedagogy in most faculties of education, but indigenizing your teaching means going even further. It means getting to know your students as people and through your relationships you’ll also learn about their families – their aunties, cousins, and grandparents. It also means allowing them to learn about you and your relatives. I learned about the importance of the circle and the talking stick. I learned that while First Nations cultures vary greatly (as different as individuals from Russia and China would be according to Sylvia McAdam) there are some common elements within a worldview. I learned that many communities “taught” their children through a process of modeling, that there

was respect for everyone in the community and a strong understanding that everyone had something valuable to contribute. Learning these teachings is only part of decolonizing: I actively practice these approaches in my teaching work.

Indigenizing my teaching means first and foremost sincere relationship building. I get to know my students and they get to know me. I have come to see working in this institution as the creation of a family, a community: we often reflect this idea that we are all related. Our late Elder Velma Goodfeather often said, "I shake hands with each and every one of you...all my relations."

Relationship building is reciprocal and underscores the belief that we are all related. To support this, I teach in a circle and begin every class with a prayer. The prayer is simply a statement that we have a good class and that we learn and respect one another. It is not "religious."

CURRICULUM

Shauneen

In order to fill the gaps in my students knowing I purposefully choose readings by Indigenous scholars. I privilege readings from Indigenous journals. I draw on scholarship on culturally inclusive teaching, Indigenous knowledge, and Indigenous educational models (Dei, 2011; Abu-Saad & Champagne, 2006; Battiste, 2005; Gay, 2010; Banks, 2001; Kape'ahiokalani PadekenAh-Nee Penham & Cooper, 2000; Maaka & Anderson, 2006; Castellano, 2000). I compliment this work with a close examination of our provincial policies on inclusion. Each class is introduced to the Continuous Improvement Framework from the Ministry of Learning (SK) which states that closing the educational gap for First Nations and Métis learners is a responsibility of all educators in the province. I assert that in Saskatchewan we have had policies to address Aboriginal education for over thirty years. I remind the students that like them I am a product of this policy, and that we have all been limited in our access to information about Aboriginal peoples. However, I assert that these limitations are not excuses for inaction. I challenge them to consider how individual educators can continue to shirk their Ministry driven obligations to First Nations and Métis education. I ask them to consider their future roles in regard to the delivery of equitable education and their own accountability for closing the gap. This discussion

about policy often concludes with a discussion about how institutional racism allows for the minimization of the importance of Aboriginal education in our province and how pressures to conform in the profession often discourage a more responsive teaching practice.

Bettina

In my Introduction to Organizational Behaviour course, a text-based course, I ask my students to write their term papers on a First Nations organization of their choice in order to go beyond the realm of the text. Students are asked to provide an overview of individual, team and organizational-level behaviours as well as an in-depth analysis of how First Nations values and ways of knowing play a significant role within the organization. In all of my classes, I have attempted to diversify the curricula I use in the classroom: we focus on the work of Indigenous scholars; Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal business cases; documentaries and YouTube clips on Aboriginal businesses, entrepreneurs and marketing strategies; Aboriginal guest lecturers; and the inclusion of the Elders in the classroom. In an effort to introduce the Elders Office and the Elders at FNUniv to my students, I recently invited the Elders Assistant, Roland Kaye, and our Elder Protector, Tony Cote, to speak to my classes on the first day. Roland offered tobacco and asked the Elder for prayers to be said for a good semester. After offering prayers, Elder Tony shared a little bit about his life, his history with FNUniv and his hope for the students. While a small effort, it is one step toward introducing students to the Elders at FNUniv, the different protocols they teach us and the important role they play within the institution. I have also asked the Elders Office to present on the Medicine Wheel in order to help me teach the importance of balance for optimal health and well-being when dealing with different stressors in the workplace.

Kathleen

Like Shauneen and Bettina, I also privilege materials from Indigenous sources, invite Elders and First Nations scholars as guest speakers to my classes. At the introductory classes, we recall and interrogate our memories of school and the curricular materials that were focused upon. What we didn't hear or learn about is also questioned. Even though many of my students are recent graduates of the school system, it is amazing how little they learn about First Nations. As a recent student told me: "I didn't take Native Studies

in high school and so I didn't know anything about Aboriginal people until now." We understand this absence of knowing as an example of institutional racism operating in our province. We discuss this further in the next section.

RACISM

Shauneen

Indigenizing my teaching is about expecting and confronting racism. I have learned that by privileging Indigenous scholarship in my course outlines both passive and overt forms of racism will arise. I challenge my students to examine the manner in which otherness and privilege is tied up with the "race project" (Omi & Winant, 1994). They begin to identify ways in which they are privileged (McIntosh, 1998) by their own racial identities. They begin to examine their success in schooling as itself racially constructed. In my classes I expose whiteness, require its deconstruction and trouble perceptions about self and other; and the resistance is obvious. My students claim "color-blindness" and they believe that by simply "treating people all the same" we can "all just get along". We explore the ways in which colorblindness and meritocracy mask the persistence of the attainment gap for individuals who are Black, Hispanic and Native American/First Nations. I name this gap as evidence of institutional forms of racism. Many students deny race privilege at the same time as acknowledging that others have been oppressed. Until such time as they can begin to examine privilege as it serves supremacy, domination and oppression they are resistant to imagining another way of being an educator (Solomon & Daniel, 2007).

In spite of their resistance, in the absence of racial diversity in the college, I have to have faith that some of them will become allies. I acknowledge to my students that because of their racial identity they will often be "heard" more so than their colleagues of color. I ask them, "What measure of your privilege are you willing to give up in order to create a measure of equality for another?"

Bettina

Indigenizing my teaching means that I am purposeful in my confrontation of racism and stereotypes and in my examination of Indigenous topics in my courses. What does it mean to be purposeful in one's confrontation of racism? As I move forward in this process, I attempt to provide course content that offers First Nations perspectives on

different subject matters. I discuss stereotyping, systemic discrimination and representation within organizational and business-related contexts. Furthermore, I attempt to provide more avenues of self-reflection for my students when exploring different subject matters. For example, I am currently teaching an Introduction to Marketing class this semester. I have asked my students to read a chapter on “Ethics and Social Responsibility” in their marketing text along with a chapter in *Cultural Representations in Native America* (Jolivette, 2006) titled “Say Hau to Native American Barbie” by Kim Shuck. Shuck herself uses Native American/American Indian Barbie as a teaching resource in the classroom as a way to explore history, stereotypes and oral literature. As an instructor of an Introduction to Marketing course taught at FNUniv, exploring the marketing strategies surrounding Native American/American Indian Barbie is an important exercise in teaching my students the practices and politics of cultural representation in marketing, an area glaringly absent within the textbook chapter on ethics and social responsibility. After completing the above readings, I ask my students to write a self-reflective essay that answers some of the following questions: What stereotypes are reinforced by Mattel’s Native American/American Indian Barbie dolls and why are these stereotypes problematic? What misinformation do these stereotypes communicate? And what societal responsibility does Mattel have to the general public when marketing Native American/American Indian Barbie dolls? Has Mattel fulfilled its societal responsibility?

INDIGENIZING AS PEDAGOGY

Shauneen

I often compliment my course readings with stories from the field. I share narratives informed by my own experiences as a storyteller, researcher, school evaluator, curriculum writer and educator. I tell stories and examples from the Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators who have shared their experiences with me. As a traditional storyteller myself, I also draw from the rich narrative history of various Indigenous peoples to provide examples of our worldviews, traditional teaching approaches, and story protocol traditions.

Our stories are sources of knowledge. They offer a counter-hegemonic narrative to the mainstream curriculum. The inclusion of

stories is an act of resistance to the dominant constructions of First Nations identities. These stories expose colonialism, race and racism. They introduce concepts of self-determination and sovereignty at the same time as I expose their contradictions for First Nations politicising in education. By speaking about, and critiquing these various themes I take my students into the murky space of decolonizing schooling and teaching. As I tell the stories I trouble common sense notions of “good” teaching and I demonstrate Indigenous pedagogies in the context of mainstream schooling.

For the most part, these narratives are well received, and students claim that they bring authenticity to the theory presented in the readings. Alternatively, my students communicate in my class evaluations that I “talk too much about Indians”, “am biased towards First Nations”. They deflect my approaches with claims that I “need to address the issues of other minorities/ethnicities/languages”, forgetting or perhaps dismissing my declarations that my courses are designed so that they can learn to teach the most disadvantaged groups in our schools: First Nations and Métis learners. I challenge them to consider at what point my decision to include marginalized voices in my curriculum became “too much” brown? I ask them to identify the ways in which planning for the most disadvantaged in mind also has an effect on all learners”?

Bettina

There are many critical lessons and values taught by the Elders that are at the heart of the institution: storytelling, respect, humility, kindness, relationship-building, community and humour. How can we incorporate these values into the classroom, particularly in business courses? When we first began discussing this paper, Shauneen discussed how storytelling is a pedagogical approach that she utilizes in the classroom. In an effort to integrate more storytelling into the classroom, I am making an effort to bring in more case studies, guest speakers and video-based interviews with Aboriginal entrepreneurs and employees, so that that they can share their stories. In terms of humility, Kathleen advised me recently, if you make a mistake, acknowledge and embrace it; demonstrate humility by showing the students that it is ok to make a mistake. We can teach the importance of community by emphasizing its relevance to business and economic

development as well as through group work and demonstrating respect and kindness in our teachings and interactions throughout the semester. The importance of humour in opening up students to one another and ensuring that they enjoy the learning process cannot be overstated. Kathleen, Shauneen and I also discussed the importance of the circle, an approach I recently began reincorporating into the classroom. While size isn't often a problem within the classroom (classes are often between 10-30 students), technology has been a limiting factor at times. I often teach videoconference classes, which has limited the way I have structured the classroom in the past. As I indigenize my approaches, I am trying to think of new methods that allow me to modify the lecture-based approach to teaching and embrace a different style that allows for more student discussion and engagement. By incorporating the circle into my classes this semester, I have already noticed how it has opened up the flow of discussion and the engagement of the students.

TEACHING TO CREATE CULTURAL COMPETENCY

Shauneen

Over the years of my own professional practice I have gained much from the personal and professional relationships that I have had with various Elders. I have conducted several research projects in partnership with Elders. I bring these experiences to my classrooms through story in order for my students to understand local protocols for accessing Elders – I call this “learning to ask” so that they can “ask to learn.” I worked with one mainstream teacher who said, “I was so nervous about approaching the Elder, I thought s/he would get mad, or dismiss me, or judge me for what I did not know, that I actually cried before I went to ask them to come to my classroom. Then I realized they are just people, helpful people”. The students in my courses like this teacher are “afraid” of being perceived as ignorant, or racist. They require experiences with “the other” in order to gain cultural competency. They need to develop cultural competency in order to get over the fear. I invite Elders, traditional knowledge keepers, and diverse educators to meet and share their stories with my students. Hearing stories about my work with Elders helps, but so does meeting Elders, and practicing “asking to learn”. These experiential learning practices provide one framework for building cultural competency for my students.