

Decolonising pedagogy and promoting student well-being

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Abstract

In this paper, we position ourselves as Indigenous educators, involved in the creative healing arts, through filmmaking and community-based therapy. We discuss through an ongoing conversation our decolonising approaches to teaching and education, with a view to upholding student well-being and creating ‘communities of care’ in the classroom. This approach includes integrating the natural world into the process, encompassing Indigenous worldview, values and relationality with Mother Earth.

Introduction

This paper was written through conversations and email correspondence on the unceded lands of the Kanien’kehá:ka nation and the Wendat nation. We acknowledge everything that came before, the ancestors, our teachers, the land and all its inhabitants, human and more-than-human.

(Nicolas): Ndio!! Kwe! My name is Nicolas Renaud and I am an Assistant Professor at Concordia University in Montreal, in the First Peoples Studies program. I’m also a documentary filmmaker and visual artist. My ancestry is Wendat and Québécois. I am committed to the significance of Indigenous worldview in addressing the crisis of environmental destruction and social inequities. I hope to guide students who, like myself, are on a path of cultural reconnection, and to support their success in higher education.

(Cathy): Taanishi! My name is Catherine Richardson and my Cree name is Kineweskwêw, which means Golden Eagle Woman. I am a member of the Metis Nation. My ancestry is Gwich’in, Cree as well as English and Orkney. My ancestors were fur trading people from northern Turtle Island. As director of First Peoples Studies program director and Research Chair in Indigenous Healing Knowledges, I integrate my passion and background as a therapist to promote well-being for Indigenous people. My areas include violence recovery and prevention and response-based practice. I am connected to community and support through clinical and cultural supervision Montreal workers serving street-involved Indigenous

folk. I do this work because I want to see more emancipation and recognition of Indigenous peoples in Turtle Island and across the world. Through this approach, I promote decolonisation and centre Indigenous-centred ways of knowing and being, such as the caring for all people and the limiting the damage of global, colonial capitalism.

We discuss here a number of practices related to decolonising the classroom. This involves the integration of some Indigenous ways of knowing and being into a western, colonial education system. Working across systems means anticipating obstacles, working around limitations and creating spaces of possibility, exploration and social, collective and ecological care. We aim to create the conditions that optimise learning and community connection, often through practices of cultural safety and by creating belonging for everyone while centring Indigenous knowledges. These goals are ambitious and disappointments are many. We measure success in a number of ways, which we will address in this writing.

Terms and Definitions

Since we are working across cultures and systems, it is important to define our key terms and situate our practices in a worldview or epistemology that is Indigenous. This involves resisting colonial, fragmented and siloed approaches to knowledge. We use the term *decolonisation* broadly, in the hopes of “dismantling the master’s house,” in reference to feminist thinker Audre Lorde’s words at a conference in 1979. Pedagogically speaking, this task requires a holistic approach, evoking the mind, body, emotions and spirit. We begin by exploring “What is decolonisation?” And how do we ensure that it does not remain simply a metaphor (Tuck and Yang, 2021).

(Nicolas): *Cathy, decolonisation is a broad and complex term. How do you approach decolonisation in the context of university work?*

(Cathy): Thanks for the question, Nicolas. In this regard, I see myself as part of a larger community of Indigenous scholars, and allies, whose understandings of decolonisation are similar and overlapping, with some context-specific applications. Aotearoan Māori researcher Linda Tuhiwai Smith says that decolonisation can be described as “the formal process of handing over the instruments of government” which is now recognised as a “long-term process involving the bureaucratic, cultural, linguistic and psychological divesting of colonial power” (Smith, 1999: p. 98). While universities embody some forms of governance and decision-making, they hold much social influence. They can take leadership on certain issues in the larger community. Concordia University, for example, has taken steps to increase Indigenous awareness, such as implementing a land acknowledgement in 2017. It has implemented an Indigenous Directions Leadership Council to guide Indigenous-related policy and action. Initial steps have been made, but they are situated within rigid, colonial, bureaucratic structures where transcendence is difficult.

In this context, I see decolonisation as the implementation of processes and power-sharing that centre Indigenous peoples, build relationships with local Indigenous communities and dismantle structures that create obstacles for Indigenous people and education. Having Indigenous-specific programs can assist in this regard, particularly when upper administration is supportive, with action and funding. It is also about reclaiming the spaces of learning by Indigenousising them.

(Nicolas): *Can you give an example of what this might look like?*

(Cathy): When I worked at the School of Social Work at the University of Victoria, our program's administrative body was called "The Indigenous Circle." Here, decisions were made collectively through a facilitated discussion. Meetings were opened in a ritualistic way, with a prayer/opening words, a check in, and a commitment to work with "one heart, one mind". This philosophy can be found in the Cowichan teachings *nuts'amaat shqaluwun*, which means "people working together with one heart, one mind and one spirit, guided by the teachings of our ancestors" (Robina Thomas personal communication, Victoria, 2012). It is based on the belief that each person in the community is important and that we must help one another to work together for the good of all. Our colleague Dr. Robina Thomas guided us through processes involving Cowichan/Coast Salish teachings and processes.

At Concordia University, it is important to be respectful, and guided, engaging with the local Indigenous communities and Elders' teachings, in this case the Kanien'kehā:ka, upon whose land Concordia sits. There are processes to guide us in this relationship, such as working with Haudenosaunee knowledge keepers in Kahnawake in First Peoples Studies new Microprogram in Land-Based Education. Ideally, we would hire a tenure-track professor, as well as program staff, from the local Haudenosaunee communities, which is an ongoing aspiration. Many of First Peoples Studies' students come from the local Haudenosaunee communities, as well as one of our faculty Dr. Louellyn White. It is important to be guided by the Indigenous people from these communities, and to ensure that they are treated respectfully as these collaborations constitute inter-national relations. First Peoples Studies tries to set a standard that could be emulated by the larger university, even though there are numerous obstacles to Indigenous cultural respect, including some of the hiring practices and the absence of official affirmative action hires in the province of Quebec. This points to the need for decolonisation at all levels of government, both in and beyond the walls of the university. As well, Concordia's Indigenous students created a Decolonial Toolbox (Sioui et al., 2022) which has been helpful to share with people who want to learn more about what decolonisation might look like.

There is much more one could say about Decolonisation. It is a rich and multi-faceted process which restores the Indigenous worldview; perspectives, cultures and traditional teachings replacing Western interpretations of history (Indigenous Corporate Inc., 2017 citing Smith, 2012). Decolonisation today is not the same as the anti-colonial/anti-imperial movements of the 1950s and 60s in which many colonised countries achieved independence from the British and other European nations through a number of uprisings and movements (Satyagraha in India, liberation movements in Central America, the pan-African movement, and the Native Brotherhood in northern Turtle Island, to name only a few). Canada patriated its constitution from Britain in 1982 (then identifying the three Indigenous founding nations in Canada, the Inuit, the Metis and the First Nations). However, Canada has largely overlooked the fact that its nationhood was founded on mostly unceded Indigenous lands and that the settler population still live on lands that were never ceded through Treaty, thus illegally.

Canada has not engaged in a process of 'decolonising itself' and share the ruling power with Indigenous peoples or return stolen lands in a meaningful and comprehensive way. It is worthy of mention that some individuals in Turtle Island have begun returning and bequeathing lands to the local Indigenous groups who are the rightful and original 'owners' (Braganza, 2018; Robins, 2021; Sy

and Jackson, 2023). In fact, former Canadian Prime Minister Stephen Harper declared, in 2009, that Canada has “no history of colonialism”, to the shock and outrage of many including the Assembly of First Nations of Quebec and Labrador (Cision, 2009). However, this is only one in a long line of state obfuscations about violent origins of Canada (Coates & Wade, 2004); speaking more honestly about Canadian history is one of decolonisation’s critical pedagogical goals.

Respect and Dignity

There are numerous Indigenous codes of ethics and behaviour, deriving from the many diverse Indigenous nations and communities. *Respect* is a concept/practice that you will find in almost every code, often with nuanced forms of interaction that relate to Earth, to the seasons and to the specific conditions of each people. In referring to “The Seven Grandfather Teachings”, respect is one of these seven, along with Love, Humility, Courage, Honesty, Wisdom, and Truth. Dignity is a central premise of response-based practice, a practice which is often named in human rights, social justice or end-of-life care, but less so in educational circles.

(Cathy): I will describe “dignity-centred practice” further along in this article, and I describe dignity as such:

Dignity is central to human interaction. Whenever people are mistreated, they resist in some way. Acts of resistance, which Wade (1997) refers to as “small acts of living” seldom stop violence when there is a “power over” dynamic at work. However, they do serve to promote dignity and sometimes safety. Response-based practice provides a way to understand social interaction and to act in ways that promote dignity to humans and our more-than-human kin (Wade, 1997; Richardson and Wade, 2009; Reynolds, 2017).

I have written a number of articles speaking about the importance of dignity for healing and restoration, particularly after experiencing violence of all forms (Richardson, 2023, 2022, 2021, 2016, 2015). In terms of the work in First Peoples Studies, Indigenisation of course content and pedagogical approaches is central.

Indigenisation is a term one hears in regards to pedagogy and educational institutions. According to Monica Garvie (2023a) of Queen’s University’s Centre for Teaching and Learning:

If decolonisation is the removal or undoing of colonial elements, then Indigenisation could be seen as the addition or redoing of Indigenous elements. Indigenisation moves beyond tokenistic gestures of recognition or inclusion to meaningfully change practices and structures.

Power, dominance and control are rebalanced and returned to Indigenous peoples, and Indigenous ways of knowing and doing are perceived, presented, and practiced as equal to Western ways of knowing and doing. Examples of Indigenisation in education could include the inclusion of Indigenous readings, adoption of Indigenous learning approaches in the classroom. For non-Indigenous people, there can be a fine line between Indigenisation and cultural appropriation and it is important to seek appropriate guidance while recognising that guidance can come from many sources (Garvie, 2023b).

(Nicolas): How do you see the relationship between Indigenising and decolonising? Is re-Indigenising the classroom space akin to reclaiming land and space?

(Cathy): In some ways, decolonising a classroom relates to considering who is there in the room and what each person brings, the land upon which we learn, and developing an ethic of interaction based on creating a culture of respect (which relates to Indigenous teachings from that territory as well as from other Indigenous cultures and considering knowledge through these, and other, lenses). Decolonising a classroom involves centring Indigenous processes and protocols to a certain degree, which can be an uncomfortable process for some, and creating together new ways of understanding and learning. For example, I put “treating each other with dignity” as an interactional and process goal in the syllabus.

In First Peoples Studies, my goals for decolonisation involve replacing unhealthy competition in the classroom with a culture of cooperation and collective care. My methods include creating cultural safety through the upholding of dignity in all social and educational interaction. Cultural safety disinvents racism and hierarchies. When the furniture permits, I teach in a circle. Circlework (Graveline, 1998; 2000) is based on the assumption that no one person is more important than another and that we can share and learn together in ways that include heart, mind, body and spirit. While a professor may hold more institutional power, and, as such, responsibilities for safety and ethical leadership, at a much more essential level, each and every person holds equal value. This is a teaching that we try to embody.

Embodied participation can be invited by applying medicine wheel teachings (we engage holistically with our body, mind, spirit and emotions) (Richardson, 2021, p. 14). As such, what is shared is fuelled by our emotional responses to content, and process, which then fuel an intellectual analysis. I try to teach my students that thoughts can be informed by feeling and mediated through attention to the collective experience. I build in a sense of responsibility both to self and others. We can remind students that much of their learning came from their belonging in a family, in a class, in a community. Social interaction plays an important role in our intellectual and emotional development, which are connected. Symbolic interactionism, the mitigation of our relationship between what we embrace and what we reject can provide some theoretical understanding for our learning and for our identity (Blumer, 1980; Richardson, 2004). The province of Quebec currently eschews “cultural safety” and advocates for risk-taking and “brave spaces” in education as opposed to “safe spaces.”

(Nicolas): We can clarify here that it is explicitly stated that university classrooms in Québec cannot be “safe spaces”, in the recently adopted Bill 32 on “academic freedom” (2022). It is perceived by the current right-wing government as censorship imposed by oversensitive and vindictive minorities. In their view it obstructs objective knowledge and cancels “debate” among the diversity of views, by instilling fear in people of the white majority, about saying the wrong word or having their legitimacy questioned in addressing certain topics outside their own experience. Under the pretence of “freedom” for all, by increasing the protection of professors and students from complaints, the government’s discourse around this legislation demonstrated that its motivation is essentially to allow people of the dominant culture to say any word in class, address any topic in any manner, without having to care for who is in the room and how it resonates with them in a different way. This official condemnation of notions such as “safe space”, seen as anti-democratic and censoring voices of the dominant group, is a concrete push-back against decolonisation in classrooms.

(Cathy): Yes, to me this means that students from the dominant culture are given permission to say hurtful things, often from uninformed perspectives, at the expense of wellbeing for Indigenous, racialised, and marginalised students. Decolonisation processes in education require “structures of safety” (See Richardson & Reynolds, 2014). One such structure, deriving from activism and taken up by the “Just Therapy” team in Lower Hutt, Aotearoa/New Zealand, is the idea of the “caucus” or small affinity group. Work in small group, which I call “affinity groups” can provide more safety and a depth for sharing and planning. The Just Therapy folks created caucus groups for issues pertaining to women to Indigenous Māori and Pacific Islanders. These small groups created policy, or vetted policy, that most applied to each particular group in their service delivery. When each group advised, the larger group followed their guidance. When I create small groups, I present students with a number of headings, such as “Land Back”, “Unity in Diversity”, “Indigenous Lives Matter”, “Gender exists on a spectrum”, “We are the Earth”, “Urban Indigenous”. Students then pick a first and second choice, based on which sentiment most resonates with them. This avoids the practice of establishing groups based on “race” but rather on resonance and results in creating a number of spaces for Indigenous dominance, Indigenous and allies together, and settler folks engaging in decolonisation from their own cultural standpoint. As a process, it is not perfect but it tends to work quite well.

(Cathy): *Nicolas, how to you approach classroom teaching in ways that align with your aspirations for decolonisation as well as your pedagogical goals and beliefs?*

(Nicolas): Up until now, the mindset of decolonisation in my classes has been translated mostly into the approach to the topics, which includes deconstructing colonial narratives of history, working within an Indigenous epistemology and making space for students’ own experiences, feelings, and prior knowledge. I try to create a welcoming and stimulating space for group discussions. This entails some balancing between legitimising Indigenous perspectives and acknowledging the fact that in our program we usually have mixed classes with and for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. I have not yet explored many of the possibilities for working with group dynamics and fostering collaboration among students.

Creating a safe space for teaching topics that may be emotionally charged means being aware that some content may resonate in very personal ways for some students. We don’t know how students will respond when discussing racism, the history of colonial policies, forced relocation, residential schools, if they have been touched personally by these forms of colonial violence. This content can be very real for some students while it remains theoretical for others. Some Indigenous students will disclose their familial experience while others sit quietly in discomfort. When I used to teach a graduate seminar on Indigenous Cinema in Fine Arts, some semesters saw no Indigenous students in the class. I still approached the charged topics with care, but now I can feel the difference in the air when broaching the same topics with a third or half of the class being Indigenous. However, depending on the courses we teach, we cannot merely select or avoid certain topics based on the audience. As a professor, it is not always clear how to do it. Sometimes, it can mean simply avoiding the mention of something difficult merely “in passing”, as taken-for-granted information. What appears as common “settler” experience can be contentious and painful for Indigenous students. Decolonial teaching means slowing down, grasping the weight of the issues presented and acknowledging that the information may have personal ramifications for some of the students.

(Cathy): *Nicolas, you are raising some really important points in relation to cultural and psychological safety in the classroom. How have you adjusted your teaching style over time to attend to these concerns?*

(Nicolas): One basic change I have made is to lecture less extensively than in the past. I do want to offer some insight on the content, and to deepen the context, but now I rely a lot more on conversation. Much of what I formerly delivered in a lecture format is now kept at hand as notes, a bank of facts and ideas ready to introduce into the conversation, to fuel the student exchanges. Those discussions, as well as some assignments, are framed as invitations to elicit students' personal experiences and knowledge, and to make connections with concepts, information and ideas in the course material. It is not strictly about demonstrating their mastery of the course material, like analysing an academic text, but to make it resonate with their lives and what they see in the world. It is remarkable how students participate, and the multiple directions a subject can take. When we simply ask "who has experienced something that connects to what we just saw?", a powerful, first-hand sharing can emerge.

(Cathy): *Nicolas, this conversation brings my mind to an early research study I conducted called "Revolutionising Risky Conversations." I studied the in-class realities of some people being potentially destabilised, in the moment and in their learning process, when content about colonial violence is personal. The privilege that comes with experiencing content on a theoretical level only meant that non-Indigenous students were more likely to succeed on tests and assignments while Indigenous people were re-examining their deep, personal histories and harms. How do you manage the dynamics of re-centring Indigenous realities, of the shifting power dynamics when Indigenous-centred teaching is implemented in a traditionally colonial learning space?*

(Nicolas): Whether we talk in class about power dynamics in colonialism, or about racism, about issues of identity definition, about experiencing traditional activities on the land, about attending ceremonies etc.; these are all topics about which many Indigenous students have personal experience.

We soon make a space where we can learn from anyone in class. This focus shifts my attitude as well, and students can sense it in the way I respond to various voices in the class. They can see that I am continuously learning as well on those topics from what others have to say.

Many students are good storytellers, when conveying experiences they've had, once it is clear it will not be "off topic." Over the past few semesters, I heard in class wonderful stories by students from various Indigenous cultures, talking about their land, about attending a certain ceremony and how they felt, about something outrageous a high school teacher had said on Indigenous issues, about when they were given a hard time because of pulling out their "Indian Status card" at some service point, about learning their language when their parents did not speak it at home... Those stories give something to everyone, then one story prompts one by someone else, and so on. This thread of stories tends to circle back to themes and concepts brought up in the opening lecture.

Decolonisation implies acknowledgement from the outset that the general social context we live in, here on this land, is colonial. It is colonial in its historical foundation and remains colonial today (i.e. both politically and ideologically, in relation to structures of power or attitudes and mindsets). There is an assumption that national, settler cultures hold the right to live on Indigenous lands and that

there was some sort of victory or formal transfer of power historically. It may sound like stating the obvious, but decolonisation is not a movement of restoring things *after* or *post* colonialism, it involves ongoing resistance against current forces. In the age of reconciliation, after closing the last residential school,

colonialism remains a daily presence, enduring in both overt and especially insidious ways, even subconsciously. Indigenous scholars Eve Tuck, Glen Coulthard and Audra Simpson, among others, have articulated how it is a feature of colonialism itself, in our time, to produce a denial or ignorance of its existence while it still shapes reality. It is ingrained in the operating mode of colonialism to constantly seek to “cover its tracks”. For example, if a Canadian child goes through school and never learns about colonial violence, they have had a “successful” colonial education. In contrast to this erasure, sparking critical thinking offers a helpful way for students to see and “read” the logic of colonialism, which is crucial for decolonisation.

In Québec, when the Government denies the existence of systemic racism towards Indigenous people in the healthcare system and other institutions, I suggest to students that we don't bound the issue to one stance by one political party, but to see how it derives from a growing national narrative of a “non-colonial history”, in which French settlers and Québec society were always “allies” and “friends” with Indigenous people as opposed to the English. This kind of narrative is one of the ways by which colonialism “covers its tracks”. While in English Canada, in the post-TRC era (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015) a certain discourse of dismissal of critical Indigenous voices situates colonial structures of power “in the past”, in Québec it rather says “it never existed”; both are a denial of contemporary reality that stems from colonial rhetoric and answers the need of colonial structures and processes to make themselves invisible.

Some Indigenous intellectuals have said they are no longer so interested in constantly denouncing and deconstructing colonialism, but would rather focus on building worlds separately, based on Indigenous principles and the teachings of their ancestors. I understand this. However, I still find it useful, and quite interesting, to observe and analyse how colonialism works everywhere, in the culture, the media, people's views and beliefs, politics, in resource exploitation, and so on. This may also have to do with my personal vantage point from a mixed identity, as the blind spots of Québec culture are familiar, and I am driven to keep understanding how the relationship is articulated between both worlds I'm from.

(Cathy): Nicolas, how do you see yourself as a scholar amongst other educators who might reinforce colonial values, either deliberately or unknowingly, in their approach to academia?

(Nicolas): Since Indigenous people and societies have been for a long time an object of study for Western academia in various fields, there is potential in reversing the lens, in flipping the subject-object positions. As such, non-Indigenous societies in colonial States can become objects of anthropological study for Indigenous knowledge, from Indigenous perspectives. Then the culture and values of settler societies no longer stand as the “default” reference of alleged “universality”, and we can ask: what is their mythological and ideological landscape? Why do they feel entitled to the land and everything else? Why do their politics work the way they do? What is *their* “worldview”? In the classroom, it is tricky to not alienate non-Indigenous students in this regard, as well as not creating a constant negative critical tone. But if we more specifically consider those who are part of the “white” dominant group, their perspective becomes actually most relevant when

prompted to have a critical distance on their own culture, sometimes their own personal background. That is when they can feel the most comfortable to speak.

Academic institutions in themselves do not exist either outside of the colonial context in which we live and work. So, these institutions necessarily carry colonial values and mechanisms, whether intentionally or not. There are many aspects of higher learning institutions, and the education system at large, in which this colonial bias could be found. One broad area is epistemology, in a divide between Western academia and Indigenous perspectives.

In Canada, Western culture remains centred and education systems hold a particular set of views, concepts, and experiences located in a European epistemology. Moreover, some aspects of the academic “culture” itself – such as speaking a certain language, writing in a certain form, quoting trending scholarly sources in all work and grant applications - are typically cast as the normal or “default” ethos of higher education. Hyper-specialisation is also not easily conjugated with the relational nature of Indigenous thinking. Many requirements of academic credibility do not intersect so well with Indigenous views and reality. They leave little room for other ways of thinking and knowing. And in general, there is still real distrust, and deep misunderstanding, of non-Western and non-academic channels of knowledge. Therefore, those Indigenous channels, such as oral traditions, dreams, storytelling, and all kinds of “non-rational” but lived connections to ancestors and all living things, raise suspicion in Western academic settings.

Renowned professor of History at Université du Québec à Montréal (UQÀM) and vocal critic of “safe spaces” and EDI principles, Yves Gingras, recently stated on a panel that there is a limit to “decolonising” knowledge and making room for Indigenous epistemologies. Because according to him, it would mean ultimately that “people can die” if thinking in those epistemologies; if for instance believing in curing someone from illness by holding some ceremony instead of trusting medical science (“Le sacré et la cite 27”, Episode 9, Savoir Média, 2022). So, in his view, Indigenous epistemologies are bound to some primitive magical universe. That is where we’re at, what we’re up against, still today. Any small step to try integrating those other channels, closer to Indigenous epistemologies, and despite such delirious backlash, contributes to decolonisation in schools.

(Cathy): Yes, this reminds me of a “hate letter” I received from a collection of Canadian academics, mainly mainstream anthropologists, after I condemned, in the media, a racist incident in one of our classes. I had stated publicly that colonial research is not “the truth” about everything and that Indigenous people don’t need anthropologists to tell them who they are. The scholars who signed the letter didn’t ever inquire about what had actually taken place or how the students were doing about being so insulted. How do you make meaning out of the feelings that come up when faced with racism in education?

(Nicolas): There is some anger showing through what I just shared. Although decolonisation makes some educators uncomfortable, it is in some way part of the process. However, on our part, anger is also something to manage and process, personally and through the teaching. It flares up in the classroom, when I present on certain topics, such as the current attitude of the Québec Government in managing the forest and disregarding the survival of woodland caribou. André Dudemaine, the Innu director of the Montreal First Peoples Festival, from whom I learned some key things about dealing with adversity, has a nice simple line: “Anger is a good fuel but a bad GPS”.

We can also turn to Glen Coulthard, as he clearly addresses this issue in his book *Red Skin, White Masks* (2014). He observes that the official discourse on reconciliation tends to de-legitimise and pathologise Indigenous anger (or the word he uses most: “resentment”). After Fanon’s work on decolonisation, he justifies the need for anger in the process of gaining full awareness of colonial oppressive structures, ideas and policies. It is important to shed the belief that a situation of marginalisation and stagnation is due to one’s own deficiency, in order to see in full clarity how that situation is rather caused by ongoing colonial and systemic violence. It is a form of victim-blaming commonly enacted by a perpetrator, and has produced “internalised colonialism” on a large scale. But Coulthard also acknowledges that anger can be detrimental and take people away from the path of healing, when the wounds of colonial violence are still open and deep, particularly in the context of ongoing injustice. So, there is both a need for fighting and a need for healing.

If we transfer this issue to the classroom, when addressing difficult topics, we should keep in mind that among Indigenous students, some are vitalised by the fuel for the fight while others may need paths of healing. It is difficult to gauge that balance, other than being mindful of tempering the general tone between negativity and positivity, between legitimate anger and enthusiasm about the world and its possibilities.

(Cathy): Is there a risk to having too much anger surface in the context of the classroom? How do you think anger and learning relate?

(Nicolas): The risk with anger is that it can turn against oneself and against others, in unproductive ways. Power produces hierarchies, and decolonisation aims at undoing hierarchies. But anger can subject others to the dynamics of power that one might reproduce while fighting them, instead of dismantling them. Students who consistently contribute to the conversation in an angry tone can push others away and take too much space. We understand though, that it is anger about problems and injustices in the society outside of class, and it relates to the realities we study. So, it cannot, and should not, be fully contained and condemned.

In school, and about the topics we teach, many forms of hierarchies can be challenged: between individual ethnic identities, between cultures, between different forms of knowledge, between genders, between traditional craft and art, between oral transmission and books, between humans and all non-human beings, between prof and students... There is however a fine line where one may slip into wanting power because they never had any, a temptation of exercising power over others, an impulse of shutting down their voices when yours can finally be heard. In the classroom, it happens at times in mixed groups. This usually comes from politically-minded Indigenous students and from progressive-leaning non-Indigenous students. This is likely also connected to a certain climate of communication online that today’s youth is immersed in, a certain vigilance and a language of activism that can produce as much in-fighting than mobilisation against the real problems. It leads for instance to be quick in telling others when they can speak or not, “outing” them for a word they used, or dismissing them as “part of the problem” just for the colour of their skin. This is not to say that we don’t have sometimes, as profs, to act against occasional toxic views and behaviours by a non-Indigenous student, if it threatens the safety Indigenous students should feel in class. But the issue is that we must aspire to create an exemplary frame of equal interactions with one another, if we believe in this notion of “dismantling” and not “reversing”. That means resisting power as much as the desire for power, In a mixed group there can be grey areas in that

regard, when wishing at once to create an inclusive circle and to centre Indigenous voices and perspectives.

A core principle of decolonisation is the same as what has been said about racial hierarchy by representatives of the Black Lives Matter movement: “We do not seek to reverse power, but to undo the structures of power”. There are probably different interpretations of the issue of power in decolonisation, but in my view, giving this meaning to decolonisation connects to the ancestors’ way of thinking, to their teachings about politics and ethics, about reciprocity in relationships among people, nations, and with the land. Many Indigenous cultures developed into social forms that sought harmony and freedom, consciously rejecting rigid hierarchies. For instance, the political and social structures of the Wendat and Haudenosaunee Confederacies were built on a range of laws and values that sought to limit the power of individual leaders, to balance the roles of men and women; in general, to achieve a balance between collective unity and individual agency. At the time of contact with Europeans, they encountered societies that had developed in a different direction, not concerned so much with balance and freedom for all, but with order and productivity, achieved by creating systems of hierarchies in which some categories of people have little agency.

(Nicolas): *How do you deal with transgressions in the classroom, when people clash and feelings are hurt? I understand you use what you call a “dignity-centred approach”?*

(Cathy): Yes, interestingly enough, some of this focus on dignity, and restoring the dignity of injured parties, comes from my background in education. Another aspect is informed by teachings related to respect, and oneness, found in many Indigenous codes. As a therapist, I would describe my work as Indigenous-centred, response-based practice (Coates and Wade, 2007; Richardson and Wade, 2006; Wade, 1997). Teaching that attends to the dignity of everyone in the room helps us reach a number of pedagogical aspirations. Treating people with dignity means that each person may be uplifted, expansive and more open to explore the content. Dignity promotes confidence and appreciation of self and others; dignity is relational.

Where dignity is transgressed, it can also be repaired in the group. The reparation process can also restore dignity and embody important learning. This process can show that repair is possible, it can bring hope. Once when I attended a ceremony on Coast Salish territory, I witnessed a beautiful process of dignity restoration. There were Elders up on an elevated stage; they called up a young woman in order to honour her and her achievement. On the way up the stairs to the stage, she tripped and fell, in front of hundreds of people. An Elder approached her, extended a hand and helped her up. Once on the stage, the Elder departed from the intended proceedings and took the opportunity to teach everyone about repair and restoration. The Elder told everyone that something humiliating has just happened for this young woman, and that this needed to be attended to. The Elders wrapped a blanket around the young woman, picked up their drums and sang her an honour song. By the time the song was over, the young woman was standing tall, and proud, and was demonstrably happy. She had been restored.

When people are mistreated, they resist and although resistance seldom stops violence, it serves to reassert one’s dignity. bell hooks “Teaching to Transgress” also works with this assumption. Hooks believes that education can be fun and that “education is the practice of freedom.” It is easier to feel free, or liberated (from oppression) when one feels enhanced, uplifted, viewed through the eyes of love. Educational theorist Vygotsky believed that learning benefitted from (positive) social

interaction and that it played a critical role. Dignity-centred social interaction can create optimal conditions for learning.

Dignity and critical theory can work side by side. However, dignity lines up in many ways with the Indigenous practice of relational respect. Some earlier classics, such as *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (Freire, 1968; 2018) and Frantz Fanon's writings on "Alienation and Freedom" (2018) offer food for thought about the conditions in which human beings are most likely to resist and how to create environments of liberation. Today, respect, and relationality, extend beyond humans to our interaction with the natural world, recognising that all living things have a spirit, or life force. How we treat Mother Earth is indicative of how we treat ourselves and others; these understandings permeate Indigenous education, particularly land-based approaches. Aspects of critical or ethical practice must begin with ourselves, not merely a critique of others and settler society (although a critical examination of all stages of colonialism, including settler colonialism, is important for understanding violence, resistance and repair, as is and part of the program).

(Nicolas): In Wendat and Haudenosaunee cultures, ancestors' teachings bring attention to the emotional and intellectual states we go through, to the conditions that are required for a clear mind, truthful speech, and open listening. So it also sets the conditions for respect: to speak truthfully and listen honestly. Those ideas are in stories, in aspects of the language, in political protocols. Part of the Haudenosaunee foundational story holds that thinking, in how the Peacemaker must first help Hiawatha overcome grief and anger so he can speak again, can see clearly, hear the Peacemaker's message and honestly listen to other's words on the journey across the nations.

(Cathy): *Can decolonising education be liberatory for all students?*

(Nicolas). I think it is liberatory in general if in our classes students are given tools to develop freedom of thought and a critical perspective on society. Non-Indigenous students soon understand that decolonisation is about envisioning the freedom and future of everyone, not of one group alone. Because in fact, colonialism is working against everyone, even against those who have benefited from it for a few centuries; it has produced ill forms of relationships that disconnect people from one another and from the Earth, so it ultimately leads to everyone's loss.

While there is a component of cultural specificity in decolonising education, not everything in the process is culturally specific. All students have a door opened on other ways of learning, whether it is in sharpening a critical lens on dominant historical narratives, or in doing land-based activities.

(Cathy). *Nicolas, as a film-maker, what do you think of this Lee Maracle quote?*

I think the arts has great potential to create citizens. Citizenship is about the direction your imagination travels. We can't plan or calculate or examine citizenship; it's an imagined thing. Community is an imagined thing. And if your imagination isn't working - and, of course, in oppressed people that's the first thing that goes - you can't imagine anything better. Once you can imagine something different, something better, then you're on your way.

(Nicolas): I think this quote is interesting in that she links imagination and "citizenship". First, I noticed how that term, "citizenship", is not very usual among Indigenous authors. In general, "citizenship" holds the connotation of Nation-State enrolment, so it may remain contentious from a decolonial perspective. However, we understand here it has the same resonance as if we had said

“Indigenous nationhood” or “community belonging”. She’s talking about being part of a collective project, which calls for deep relationships, and builds a sense of belonging that in turn gives ground for identity definition. On a global scale, our time is one in which the ability to imagine other worlds is very dim. The general model of Western civilization, with capitalism and State democracies, imposes itself like evidence, creating the illusion of some natural evolution. That is not only the case for people who were colonised, but even more for colonisers: they can’t imagine a different world than the one they profit from, than the hierarchy they maintain; they can’t picture a world outside capitalism and infinite growth, outside market solutions to ecological destruction, outside the alternative between election campaigns and dictatorship... The way art works, generally not with a straight message, but with suggestions, metaphors, sensations, and emotions, makes a good tool to unlock and reboot imagination.

But Indigenous imagination about a different society does not start from nothing. That is where past and future are linked in decolonisation, because the ancestors’ teachings can guide imagination. If I take the example of my Wendat ancestors, to piece back together all the parts of the world they had made but which eroded through episodes of smallpox, wars, and religious conversion, I find a complex and creative social experiment. They had to imagine that world they had made, with the system of matrilineal clans and the nations within a confederacy, and all the principles encoded in culture to balance genders, wealth, the use of natural resources, and to think and act as much with respect for the ancestors than for generations to come. They left us good examples of different possible worlds. Indigenous principles are not relics of the past on a linear evolution of societies, they are examples of other ways of thinking about relationships with others and with the Earth. Writing about the world her Anishinaabe ancestors had created, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson talks back to the assumption that Indigenous societies did not have the technological and intellectual means to build a system based on the accumulation of capital, until they encountered Europeans:

We certainly had the technology and the wisdom to develop this kind of economy, or rather we had the ethics and knowledge within grounded normativity to not develop this system, because to do so would have violated our fundamental values and ethics regarding how we relate to each other and the natural world.

(Simpson, 2017, p. 78)

Also, art can be an interesting channel for teaching about various topics, meaning when art is not itself a subject of the course. I regularly bring in class visual arts, literature, film, music, and other arts, to spark further thinking about a range of topics, instead of only scholarly sources and factual data. Because I believe that art embodies very well some elements of Indigenous epistemology. It can conjugate body and mind, intellect and feelings, and spring out of non-conventional or “non-rational” ways of knowing, such as dreams, intuition, signs of guidance by ancestors... Narrative art forms can also carry Indigenous languages and their revitalisation. And Indigenous art often involves relationships with communities, with knowledge keepers, with the land. In documentary filmmaking in particular, relationships are at the centre of the process, you are not working with actors following your script nor in a space created on set. That connects back to the role of art in creating citizenship. The concerns for reciprocity and responsibility in those relationships de-centres the artist’s ego. That is what the Western art world does not always grasp fully, on issues of appropriation and a habit of entitlement to all subjects and material outside real relationships (Renaud, 2020).

Indigenous Frameworks

(Cathy): In the context where I teach at Concordia University, the instructors often bridge Indigenous knowledges with other theories and ideas. However, there is an intentionality around centring Indigenous knowledges, theories, values and worldview/epistemology. There are multiple possible inroads to this pedagogical space. One way is through the discussion of interactional respect in a frame of Indigenous values, such as the Seven Grandfather Teachings. In First Peoples Studies, we have the opportunity, and the invitation, to work with the seven grandfather teachings. This framework provides a structure for the application and embodiment of these teachings, which are Love, Respect, Courage, Honesty, Humility, Wisdom, and Truth. This could be referred to as Indigenous, culturally responsive pedagogy. While we don't mandate practices with policies and guidelines, decolonising educators can introduce the spirit of certain concepts into the room so that we may interact with these teachings.

(Nicolas): *Can you talk about an Indigenous process or model that informs your practice?*

(Cathy): Yes, I have worked with the medicine wheel when developing curricula, or various social service approaches. The medicine wheel is a contemplative tool used by many Indigenous nations for centuries. In Wanuskewin, Saskatchewan, one may visit a medicine wheel, embedded in the Earth, as old as the pyramids of Egypt. I adapted this model and process, as a therapeutic tool, in my counselling practice (Richardson 2021). It guides me to consider how I, or another person, responded to an event, or a violation, in the social world. Much of human behaviour can be considered a response to something that has come before, or to particular conditions or environments. We respond with our body, with our mind, with our emotions/feeling body and with our spirit. This framework helps me to remember the holistic nature of our being, human spiritedness and agency. I try to foster conditions in the classroom where people can respond with openness, intellectual curiosity and the pre-conditions for a fulsome learning experience. When students are disengaged, hostile or silent, I can wonder if I have failed to create a culture of psychological safety and collective care in the classroom. I bring my counselling skills into this project and try to uphold dignity through transparency, agreement and kindness. I ask myself *"how does this classroom/educational environment contribute to holistic learning, engaging the intellect, the body/the heart, the emotional body and the spirit?"*

(Nicolas): I suppose if I were to bring in a model, or a process, it would be the fern fiddlehead, an image I adopted after I had witnessed a Māori scholar use it to illustrate Indigenous epistemology. The application of Indigenous-specific models can be helpful in the intro course of our First Peoples Studies Program at Concordia University, (FPST) where many students are new to certain concepts. Students may enter this program when they start university or they may take it as a minor as an embellishment of another major area of study. There are various teaching pedagogies, Indigenous philosophies and ways of theorising about content that students will likely not have learned in high school.

The fiddlehead makes a spiral of tight circles. There is of course an end to the tip in the centre, but we could imagine that the centre keeps spiralling to infinity. And along the stem in that spiral there are other little stems with sprouts of leaves that are curled the same way in multiple small spirals. So with this pattern of circular lines within circular lines and all parts connected to each other, we can say it synthesises a visual representation of both individual beings and Indigenous worldview. In an

individual being, we could say that each spiral within the big spiral is the body, the mind, the spirit, the feelings, the ancestors, etc. In a cosmology representation, we could say that all parts are elements of a connected universe, such as stars, Earth, humans, land and animals, water, spirit world and physical world... In a social representation, they may stand for each dimension of collective unity: politics and governance, harvesting activities, social organisation, spiritual practices, arts, etc. It is a reminder for both myself and students, to think of the connectedness and circularity of everything in an Indigenous worldview.

Summary

Decolonising is about shifting the way Indigenous people see themselves and the way non-Indigenous people view Indigenous peoples (Linda Tuhiwai Smith, 2021). Indigenous students are reasserting and/or reclaiming their right to live, publicly, in line with their culture, history and traditions. Many are active in learning their Indigenous language and restoring what was taken from them through processes of colonial violence and assimilation. In the classroom, Indigenous and non-Indigenous students can decolonise together. We are constantly reminded that there are many paths that lead to the top of a mountain. In writing this article, we hope that we have highlighted how decolonisation can be enacted within a colonial institution as well as how we manage the various tensions present in this work. While we work towards decolonising, the destination may shift. It is the process that remains align with aspirations for a new and better society, where all people are respected and values but where centring Indigenous rights, lands, values and aspirations is also possible.

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