

A Guide to Decolonizing the Classroom

Emily MacLise and Tierney Watkinson, University of Northern British Columbia

Historically, postsecondary education has served as a tool of colonialism. As the Mi'kmaq scholar Marie Battiste writes, “[t]he modern educational system was created to maintain the identity, language, and culture of a colonial society, while ignoring the need to decolonize” (30). Frequently, Canadian university courses have focused on Eurocentric knowledge and discourses while ignoring, diminishing, and misrepresenting Indigenous peoples’ histories, experiences, knowledges, and cultures, “contribut[ing] to the discontinuity and trauma Aboriginal peoples continue to experience” today (26). As a result, it is imperative that postsecondary educators decolonize their teaching practices in order to avoid perpetuating these negative impacts.

Ultimately, decolonization is the responsibility of non-Indigenous people, who must work to dismantle and replace the colonial attitudes, policies, and practices that currently inform Canadian postsecondary education (Battiste 69; Mitchell 351). For instructors, the key to decolonizing their classrooms is to incorporate Indigenous perspectives and knowledge into the curriculum of their courses, enabling Indigenous peoples to see themselves represented in course content (Battiste 163; Mitchell 353; Pete et al. 103; Sims). It is also critical to recognize and attend to the immediate context of settler colonialism in the territories on which courses are held (Tuck and Yang 3). What follows is a discussion of suggested practices that you can use to decolonize your classroom.

Using Indigenous Sources in Curriculum

Many conventional academic sources have been created without the input of Indigenous peoples. Often, these sources have either ignored and erased Indigenous peoples’ histories, voices, and experiences or have appropriated, distorted, and misrepresented them (Sims).

As a result, when selecting readings, it is important to consider who wrote them and why they were written, keeping in mind that their representations of Indigenous peoples and Indigenous-settler relations may not be accurate. While no source is perfect, it is important to try to find readings that provide accurate, authentic information (Pete et al. 99-100; Sims). If you are going to use a source with inaccuracies, openly discuss and critique those inaccuracies with students during classes to foster their critical thinking skills (Sims).

It is also important to include sources by Indigenous authors to ensure that Indigenous voices and perspectives are substantively represented in your course curriculum. These sources may include the work of Indigenous scholars, as well as reports and other publications written by Indigenous communities. Additionally, consider using sources that are not written, such as oral histories, stories, documentaries, and interviews (Hoffman 198; Pete et al. 106-107).

The following are some examples of potential resources for curriculum (Sims).

- Online Databases
 - Gabriel Dumont Institute of Native Studies and Applied Research: gdins.org/
 - Indigenous Insights at the University of Winnipeg: www.uwinnipeg.ca/indigenous-insights/
 - Indigenous Studies Portal at the University of Saskatchewan: portal.usask.ca/
 - National Collaborating Centre for Indigenous Health (NCCIH): www.nccih.ca/en/
 - OurVoices.ca (Omushkego Oral History Project): www.ourvoices.ca/index
 - Virtual Museum of Metis History and Culture: www.metismuseum.ca/
- Archives
 - BC Archives: search-bcarchives.royalbcmuseum.bc.ca/
 - Exploration Place: theexplorationplace.com/
 - Library and Archives Canada (LAC): library-archives.canada.ca/eng
 - Northern BC Archives: libguides.unbc.ca/archives/home
- Associations
 - Native American and Indigenous Studies Association: naisa.org/
 - Shekon Neechie: An Indigenous History Site: shekonneechie.ca/
- Films
 - National Film Board (NFB) of Canada: www.nfb.ca/
 - Knowledge Network NFB Indigenous Cinema Collection: www.knowledge.ca/browse/nfb-indigenous-cinema
 - *A Birth of a Family* by Tasha Hubbard (documentary): www.nfb.ca/film/birth_of_a_family/

Including Indigenous Knowledges in Curriculum

Another way to decolonize your course content is to respectfully include and integrate Indigenous knowledges in your curriculum. As Battiste writes, “Indigenous knowledges are diverse learning processes that come from living intimately with the land, working with the resources surrounding that land base, and the relationships that it has fostered over time and place.” Traditionally, “Indigenous Elders have transmitted the functions and knowledge inherent to their living on the land” via the oral tradition (Battiste 33). Indigenous knowledges are diverse, not uniform or identical, as each Indigenous nation holds unique knowledge gleaned from living in its specific traditional territory (66).

It is important to include Indigenous knowledges as integral parts of your curriculum, centering them “at the core of [your] instructional practices” in order to affirm their significance and relevance within the discipline that you teach (Pete et al. 103), rather than only incorporating a token amount (Isaac 31). When using Indigenous knowledges, you should recognize that they

hold equal value and validity with Western knowledge systems (Pighin 63), and you should be careful to avoid “water[ing] down the content or trivializ[ing] it in any way” (Isaac 85).

The most effective way to incorporate Indigenous knowledges into your curriculum is to respectfully seek out the wisdom of Elders and other knowledge holders from local Indigenous communities, who may be willing to visit classrooms as guest speakers (Hoffman 200). It is important to recognize that these individuals are in no way obligated to share their knowledge with you, and that communities may have restrictions on “what knowledge is held for certain holders, who can access the knowledge, and in what contexts it can be shared” (Battiste 73). If they are willing to share their knowledge, you must ensure that it is handled “in a responsible manner as defined by the cultural context from which it arises” (Hoffman 197). Below are some suggestions for engaging with Indigenous communities, Elders, and knowledge holders.

Community Engagement

Relationships are key to community engagement. You should get to know and make genuine connections with people from the local Indigenous community, recognizing that building relationships is an ongoing process that takes time.¹ Before doing so, you should find out what the protocols around engagement are within the local community, as some bands, tribal councils, and nations have regulations, application processes, forms, and/or employees dedicated to community engagement. This information is often listed on their websites (Sims).

Reciprocity is a crucial part of building and maintaining healthy relationships. While most Indigenous communities in Canada value reciprocity, it may take different forms depending on each community’s protocols. Usually, it is culturally appropriate to provide a gift to the Elder(s), Chief(s), knowledge holder(s), or other community member(s) that you are engaging with. This gift is a demonstration of respect and reciprocity, not a payment for services provided. While common gifts include tobacco, sweetgrass, and honorariums, appropriate gifts vary according to each community’s protocols.² It is important that you take adequate time to plan and properly perform them. Keep in mind that performing protocols correctly does not entitle you to anything, as Indigenous people do not owe you their time, knowledges, or stories (Sims).

¹ It is important to note that defining “community” can be complicated. For example, Indigenous people from many different nations may reside within one nation’s territory, or they may have ties to multiple communities.

² Currently, although UNBC offers cash honorariums for Elders, it does not have a uniform honorarium policy. As a result, what UNBC will provide as an honorarium varies depending on the event type.

Critically, the community must always be in control of engagement and able to withdraw consent at any time. The level of engagement may vary: while some communities may want to have direct involvement, others may simply want to have a general influence over what happens with the knowledge they share. It is important that you listen to and do what the community wants, approaching engagement from a position of respect and humility. If you make a mistake, acknowledge your ignorance and apologize (Sims).

Bringing Elders and Knowledge Holders into the Classroom

As the Dakelh researcher Bev Isaac states, “Elders and other knowledge holders are the best source of information” about Indigenous knowledges, histories, cultures, and stories (105). They may be willing to come into classrooms as guest lecturers, interactive speakers, or experiential instructors to educate students about these subjects. If so, they should be able to share their knowledge and stories as they wish, recognizing that they are the experts on these topics.

Whenever you engage with Elders and other knowledge holders, you must follow local protocols and consistently demonstrate respect and reciprocity, as discussed above (Isaac 99).

Emphasizing Land-Based Education

As Matthew Wildcat et al. write, since “colonization is fundamentally about dispossessing Indigenous peoples from land, decolonization must involve forms of education that reconnect Indigenous peoples to land and the social relations, knowledges and languages that arise from the land” (I). Land-based education involves “moving from talk *about* the land within conventional classroom settings” to “engag[ing] in conversations *with* the land and *on* the land in a physical, social and spiritual sense” (II; emphasis added).

As a result, land-based education may include field trips, walks, or simply holding class outdoors on campus in order to experience the land.³ As Wildcat et al. state, “the delivery of land-based education must always be rooted in place and the histories of Indigenous peoples from those places” (XII), and it must center local Indigenous peoples’ epistemological and ontological understandings and knowledges of the land (McCoy et al. 13). For example, in a geography or environmental studies course, you could incorporate Indigenous perspectives when learning about landscapes and environments. Land-based education must also attend to the “historical and current contexts of colonization” that have affected and continue to impact Indigenous peoples’ relationships to land (1).

³ If you wish to incorporate a field trip, you must notify students that the course will include a field trip in the course description and syllabus so that they are given advance notice. UNBC has funding available for field trips, so do not be deterred by potential cost.

Incorporating Experiential Learning

Experiential learning is closely connected to land-based education, although the two concepts are not synonymous. In many Indigenous cultures, experiential learning is a traditional method of passing on knowledge through hands-on experience (Pighin 128). During experiential learning, students learn about local Indigenous knowledges and cultures by engaging in activities such as site visits, preparing traditional foods, making culturally significant items, or participating in drumming or ceremonies. Experiential learning must be led by an Elder or other knowledge holder (61). While experiential learning may involve a field trip, it can also be achieved simply by bringing Elders and knowledge holders into the classroom to lead a hands-on learning activity with students (Sims).

Creating Discussion-Oriented Classrooms

Another decolonizing strategy is to move away from a lecture-oriented approach to teaching and, instead, use other approaches that allow for more student engagement and discussion. Aim to create a classroom where everyone's voice is heard and valued. To encourage discussion and discourse with students, consider moving away from traditional classroom setups and, instead, arranging your classroom into a circle (Pete et al. 111).⁴ You can also use strategies such as holding informal in-class debates about course materials and, if possible, encouraging ad hoc research into relevant subjects. It is imperative that you do not single out or rely upon Indigenous students to lead discussions in your classroom, as doing so places an unfair burden upon them. To accommodate students who are not comfortable talking or presenting in large group settings, you can try dividing your classroom into several smaller circles and/or creating written or online discussion components (Sims).

A related approach is to incorporate talking circles and/or talking sticks into the classroom. As each Indigenous community that uses these practices has its own way of doing so, you should "look to the local Elders and community members on how to properly include" these practices (Isaac 102-103).

Using In-Class Workshops

You may want to use existing workshops that have been developed to teach participants about colonialism and Indigenous-settler relations in one of your classes.

⁴ If you plan to use circles, submit a request for a seminar-style room when requesting a classroom so that UNBC is aware of the need for this type of classroom.

The following are examples of such workshops:

- “A Walk through Colonization” by Gitz Crazyboy: gitzcrazyboy.com/instructor
 - Recreates colonialism on an abstract level by dividing participants into two teams that must adapt to ever-changing rules
 - Takes approximately 1.5-2 hours
- “The Blanket Exercise” by KAIROS Canada: www.kairosblanketexercise.org/
 - Makes participants experience colonization, so it can be triggering
 - Takes approximately 1.5-2 hours

Using Unconventional Assignment Formats

You can also use unconventional assignment formats that accommodate various learning styles and provide multiple means of engagement, summation, and assessment (Sims). It is important to plan your course design and methods of assessment well in advance and to have clear learning outcomes and objectives. Be aware that some students are comfortable with traditional assignments and may be uncomfortable with change, so be willing to receive feedback and to provide reassurance to students who are unfamiliar with alternative assignment formats.

The following are some suggestions for unconventional assignment formats that you may wish to try in your courses. All of these assignments can be individual or group projects, and most can be scaffolded into smaller assignments.

- Public displays
 - Ask students to select a topic relevant to the course and then create something that can be displayed to teach the general public about it
 - For example, students could create a poster, documentary, painting, exhibit, etc.
 - Include a reflection paper as part of the assignment
 - Ask students to explain why they chose their particular subject and display format, and what they learned from the process
- Filmmaking
 - Ask students to create a film based on course content
 - Emphasize the importance of oral and visual storytelling
- Surveys and interviews
 - Ask students to conduct surveys or interviews and then report on them in a verbal or written format
 - Students may need to apply to the ethics board before conducting their surveys or interviews
 - Help students to develop and actualize research questions and proposals before they survey or interview participants

- Community reports
 - Ask the students to research and write a report for the local Indigenous community
 - Focus on providing a solution to a local issue, rather than using a deficit- or problem-oriented approach
 - Ensure that the entire process is community-driven
 - Work with the students to produce the report and give them writing credit on it
- Mapmaking
 - Make a map of one or more Indigenous nations in Canada and update as necessary
 - Since many territories and place names are disputed, you may need to discuss this issue with students
 - Include a reflection paper as part of the assignment
 - Ask students to discuss what they learned from this exercise
- Autoethnography
 - Ask students to write a personal statement introducing themselves and discussing the sociocultural contexts that have influenced them

Issues that May Arise when Decolonizing the Classroom

Colonialism and decolonization are complex, sensitive topics that are often challenging to discuss. It is possible that class discussions of these subjects will provoke defensive and/or racist responses from non-Indigenous students who do not want to consider how they have been privileged by or benefitted from colonialism, or who simply do not know enough about these issues yet to understand them (Smith et al. 30-31). However, confronting these issues “is a necessary initial process in developing a decolonization consciousness in Canadian education” (Battiste 125). As a result, it is important that you anticipate and are prepared to respond to resistance or racism within your classroom. Be ready to have difficult conversations with students about colonialism, race, stereotyping, otherness, discrimination, and privilege in a sensitive, compassionate manner (Pete et al. 108).

Additionally, you should be aware that discussions of these subjects may be triggering for some students. While it is important not to shy away from these discussions, as they are a necessary part of decolonization, you must be prepared to deal with the difficult feelings that may arise. Plan everything and ensure that you tell students what to expect from your course and each class in advance. You may also want to work with a wellness team on campus and have a wellness provider available to offer immediate assistance and comfort to students who need it.

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Further Resources

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