

There are many challenges that our society currently faces. From environmental degradation to social inequalities and poverty, the list is extensive and expands given each community's specific relation to the issue. With such grand and complex issues, it can be quite overwhelming to address them. More so, how do we as citizens engage in a way that may contribute and not hinder the progress of our world? This question is the inspiration for my essay topic but also the question I hold as I navigate through my undergraduate degree. We speak in class about the various challenges that Indigenous peoples are facing with as a result of the colonial and patriarchal systems of oppression. But what are we, as undergraduate students and more particularly as students who are non-Indigenous, able to do to contribute to the situation at hand. Better yet, is our engagement in these issues necessarily welcomed or needed? This question of what should or should not be done when engaging with Indigenous issues grew as I learned more about these injustices and became eager to support these communities. Yet I did not want to do so in a way that would be offensive or detrimental to the community. Upon further in class and one on one discussions with my professor, I began to realize that due to the grandeur, complexities and context specificity of these issues, there is no one singular way of engaging with them and that it is more important to be conscious of the *ways* to navigate through these challenges. Hence, I decided to investigate principles of engagement that one should consider and embody when working with Indigenous communities. Principles in terms of guidelines or frameworks that does not have an exact course of action that must be followed, but have common underlying reasons behind the actions taken. This is much more beneficial because no same challenge is similar to the other, making it ineffective to know exactly how to deal with the countless possible scenarios. But if one understands broader principles, one can use this general framework while being able to stay adaptive to the context at hand.

With this in mind, the essay talks about five principles of engagement for the challenges that Indigenous communities are addressing. The principles derive from common themes that have arisen through the review of a range of texts and an interview with a member of the Faculty of First Nations and Indigenous Studies. The five principles that will be investigated are; Humility, Respect, Freedom, Inclusion, Voicing. Although these five principles will be investigated independently, they are all interconnected in the sense that the success of embodying one of the principles requires the embodiment of the others simultaneously. The

principles cannot be selective but they must be approached holistically for its effectiveness in engagement.

My hope is not to enforce and glorify these principles, but to stimulate dialogue for others to explore, approve and contest them. These principles may not only be specific to the challenges that Indigenous peoples are facing, but may be expanded to engagement in relations to other social, environmental and economic challenges of our present day. Engagement and its principles are important because I believe that everyone needs to be engaged and collaborate together in order to make the world a better place, but the way in which you do it depends on what the unknown that the future holds.

Principle 1: Humility

The Oxford American dictionary defines the term humility as “a modest or low view of one’s own importance”. When applying this term to social injustices, humility is what allows the acknowledgement of your own faults and the ability to take the difficult steps in improving the situation. It is about looking inwards and being willing to unlearning the ways of thinking that our colonial-based society has instilled into us. This passage is an example that speaks to the need to acknowledge one’s faults:

“Georges Erasmus, then president of the Dene Nation, told me at the time that working in solidarity with the Dene meant working to change the structures in *my own society*. He explained that the Dene people knew what they wanted and how to get there. But what stood in their way and prevented them from being who they truly were, he said, were *non-aboriginal values and structures*.” (Engelstad and Bird 205)

Although the past has shown many instances of intentional harm towards Indigenous communities, many challenges are perpetuated by an unawareness of non-Indigenous peoples that unintentionally harm and oppress these communities. However, if someone is accused of a wrongdoing, a negative and offensive reaction may arise which may not be accommodating to others’ needs. It is for this reason that humility as principle is crucial, because it fosters a mindset that is more willing to accept the needs of other communities when you may be the one preventing the community from attaining their needs. This idea is echoed by Engelstad and Bird saying that “we must look inward and collectively find alternatives to the *excesses in our*

lifestyles that we enjoy as a direct result of having deprived aboriginal peoples of the resources they need” (227).

Humility also entails not centering oneself in narratives and discussions by seeking to understand the other. Engelstad and Bird expresses the need for us as non-Indigenous peoples to “begin to recognize the authenticity of the pain and disappointment aboriginal people experience. Only when we begin to comprehend and fully acknowledge the magnitude of aboriginal peoples’ alienation from themselves, their communities, from their creator and non-aboriginal societies will we have a context for beginning our relationship a new” (226). It can be difficult to empathize with such a traumatic history of these peoples, especially when one learns that they may be perpetuating the systems that oppress other communities. But by embracing humility, this sense of guilt may diminish as one does not protect their individual importance but rather focuses on the importance of the issues that Indigenous communities are facing. During the interview with Dr Gaertner, the idea of humility as a principle was introduced as I saw how humility may be apparent when one is willing to disengage when not welcomed by the community. Although Dr Gaertner agrees with the sentiment of humility, he cautions to be conscious of how this word may continue to centralize non-Indigenous people in positions of power within the narrative of these challenges. That engagement should not be making a show of what non-Indigenous peoples are doing and these gestures must be done in a quieter manner. Dr Gaertner also speaks to the importance of understanding the relationship between one’s own positionality and Indigenous communities and challenges and that this understanding of relationship is an ongoing process which requires humility to learn. Investigating yourself is important because oftentimes, the narrative of these issues are assigned onto “the other” and it is often framed as “how we can help them”. But a large part of these challenges are people’s unwillingness to look at themselves.

Lastly, humility is integrated within the Truth and Reconciliation commission, specifically within principle three which states that “reconciliation is a process of healing of relationships that requires public truth sharing, apology, and commemoration that acknowledge and redress past harms” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada). In addition, the Canadian government says in their formal apology that they “recognizes that the absence of an apology has been an impediment to healing and reconciliation” (Harper). Both the example emphasizes the value of publicizing their wrongdoings and have the humility to apologize to help

collectively progress forward. And although these apologies are definitely not sufficient for all that has occurred in the past, it is a necessary step in the direction of understanding the issues that affect both non-Indigenous and Indigenous peoples.

Principle 2: Respect

Respect is the second principle that arose while investigating multiple texts and through the course lectures. It is the concept of giving care to others regardless of who they are as well as extending this care to the non-living of our world. This is a principle that is valued by Indigenous peoples as Engelstad and Bird say that “our people...believed that all things had their place, from even the smallest insect and the smallest leaf. And they were taught to respect life and all living things.” (4). It is when there is an absence of respect for all things in our world that conflict arise. There are many examples of the disrespect the colonizers have had throughout history, one example is that of treaties where “non-native people, represented by federal, provincial and local government, have continued to break the original agreements” (Engelstad and Bird 5). In addition, the TRC’s second principle recognizes the need for respect, stating that “First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, as the original peoples of this country and as self-determining peoples, have Treaty, constitutional, and human rights that must be recognized and respected” (TRC). The fact that the TRC mentions the need for recognition and respect for constitutional and human rights is indicative of its absence in the past and its need when moving forward. Moreover, the Global Indigenous Rights Lecture’s guest Chief Littlechild also integrates the importance of respect as he shares how certain community representatives are simply looking for recognition, respect and justice for what has happened before (Chief Littlechild). Vowels speaks to the importance of respect in her section regarding terminology. She says the importance of respect in accepting how different communities would like to be identified and spoken about (14). That as non-Indigenous peoples from outside the community hoping to engage, it is about respectfully asking and showing an open acceptance of being corrected.

We cannot continue to perpetuate a system that creates a negative and oppressive narrative for these communities. “For a lot of people, to be superior to an Indian all you have to be is not an Indian. And that’s a message we don’t like to hear anymore...we have been told since the first missionaries arrived that we’re not quite human and don’t know what we’re doing”

(Engelstad and Bird 201). It is extremely difficult to rebuild on a past with such shaking foundations of repeated disrespect for another community. This is why it is so important to embody respect and to respect everyone, regardless of the person or context, in order to create the trust needed to build strong relationships for the present and future. It is through the fostering of consistent respect that an environment for change can be made.

Principle 3: Freedom

When referring to the term freedom, we speak about the idea that society should not impose restrictions onto another individual or community. Specifically, that Indigenous communities should be free to do what they have been doing prior to colonialism. This requires the first principle of humility as one must recognize that the ways that Western society currently operates does not fit the needs of all communities. This is important because freedom from the restrictions of colonialism is what will allow communities to identify and fill the needs that are missing within their community on their own. And this ownership is the key for long term sustained communities that are self-governing. Engelstad and Bird notes that “there must be a time when the kind of colonial, dictatorial control that is running our lives comes to an end. We must have freedom at some point” (9). We see the restriction in many cases in the Indigenous history in treaties, where “in many cases it is evident that treaties were imposed upon First Nations and that their leaders had little choice but to consent” (Engelstad and Bird 7). Indigenous communities know what is required and are working hard to create change, yet it is often the inability of settler to not allow the space for growth nor the opportunity to solve their own challenges. Engelstad and Bird also says that “[Indigenous peoples] are prepared to negotiate. But we definitely need enough control over our lives that we can grow, we can flourish, we can prosper” (11)

However, removing the barriers for freedom requires a certain amount of trust and respect for the differences of values and goals for the community. When one has a vision of their own needs and does not prioritize the needs and capabilities of others, freedom will not develop as the imposition of one’s own desires creates restrictions. This echoed by (Engelstad and Bird), saying that “whether they really believe that Indigenous people are capable of making decisions to ensure that the land is kept healthy for future generations. If they feel that we are not capable or if they do not know whether we’re capable, then they need to come and talk to us.

They need to look at the work we're doing and what our vision for the future is and how it's going to work. (Engelstad and Bird 201). In addition, the assembly of First Nations says that "the essential point is that each community must have the freedom, power, and resources to draw on its own strengths and tradition, in order to heal the wounds that the past has left and to get on with the great task of rebuilding." (Engelstad and Bird 226)

When asked the question of how to improve the engagement of non-Indigenous communities with Indigenous issues, Dr Gaertner explains how it depends on the issue and it depends on whether these communities want the engagement of non-Indigenous peoples or not. It is this freedom to choose that is required so that Indigenous communities may express what they want and what they feel is best based on their specific needs. It is paternalistic when white communities want to "help" or act upon a "savior position". Although it should not be viewed as negative to be willing to support others, one does not necessarily have to be doing something FOR or even WITH these communities. Oftentimes, it is about engaging in ways to change yourself. It touches on the point of looking inward and being willing to listen to others in order to change yourself which allows you to put yourself in position to better listen. We must learn to attend to ourselves and the ways that we behave first rather than seeking for ways to improve the other.

Principle 4: Inclusion

Inclusion will be discussed as ensuring that the presence and voices of all people have the opportunity to be heard. In the context of this course, inclusion speaks to providing opportunities for Indigenous communities to be heard in a society where they may be fighting to speak but are not given the platform for the public to notice nor that will create social change.

An example of this is in 1876 when the federal government passed its first Indian act:

"The Indian act was passed by the federal government because it had exclusive legislative responsibility for Indians and lands reserved for Indians, *but First Nations themselves had no input into it*. Neither did First Nations' citizens have any part in electing the politicians who legislated the Indian Acts, *since native people were not allowed to vote federally until 1960*." (Engelstad and Bird 8)

This is exemplified further by the clear desire stated below:

“What is it that our people are after? Simply this: we want to sit down across the table from the leaders of this country and come up with a genuine solution that will be acceptable both to indigenous nations and to the people who have come here from elsewhere” (Engelstad and Bird 10)

It is only through inclusion that we will be able to create a future that is based on collaboration and solidarity. And it is only through the process of including everyone’s voice that we may be able to gain a holistic understanding of the challenges and the gaps that everyone must engage with. Yet it is not only about providing platforms for sharing, but for the public to be willing to listen. Dr Gaertner speaks to the importance of listening to what people and communities are saying. Often people do not want to listen because the outcome is that they realize that the work that they are doing is not beneficial to other communities. Dr Gaertner is also collecting Indigenous texts that have not been published and hopes to republish them as a newer version. He is conscious to listen to the members of the community and to see what the community hopes to include or disregard while publishing with them. He says that it is important to work WITH community, which again stems to the importance of listening as an act of inclusion. He emphasizes the importance of hearing everyone’s voices when the colonial system represses the voices of so many and to understand the specificity of each community’s needs.

The principle of inclusion is also reflected with two of the TRC’s principles. Principle 5 says that “reconciliation must create a more equitable and inclusive society by closing the gaps in social, health, and economic outcomes that exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians” and principle 7 states that “the perspectives and understandings of Aboriginal Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers of the ethics, concepts, and practices of reconciliation are vital to long-term reconciliation. Both principle express a hope for a future that is more inclusive, whether it is by addressing the gaps of different communities or including different members of the community within the dialogue. Vowels adds to this, saying that “in order to form healthier and more positive relationships with the future, there needs to be dialogue between all people living on these lands” (14). And dialogue can only occur when groups included in the opportunities to share and there is a willingness to listen to everyone.

Principle 5: Voicing

Voicing will be referred as the courage to put yourself out there to address these issues as tackling these issues is a daunting task. Engelstad and Bird say that “native people have the enormous job of tapping people on the shoulder and saying, ‘This is not the way it’s supposed to be. This is not the way we are supposed to be coexisting. We aren’t supposed to be the poorest of the poor in our land’” (6). The need for everyone to voice in order to help with the challenges faced by Indigenous communities is even emphasized within the TRC’s sixth principle, stating that “all Canadians, as Treaty peoples, share responsibility for establishing and maintaining mutually respectful relationships” (TRC). Although the concept of listening to communities as a way to foster inclusion within the dialogue was discussion and “are important preconditions to a renewed relationship of trust and mutual respect”, it must also lead to action. “Non-aboriginal Canadians must seize the challenge that aboriginal peoples offer by moving from positions of support to active solidarity” (Engelstad and Bird 229).

Yet prior to this class and the interview with Dr Gaertner, the mindset of seeking ways to engage in these issues with tangible and measurable actions was regarded by myself as what to strive. My perception has changed to one that is welcome to a larger range of engagement. For example, one way of engaging could be “simply by learning to listen to aboriginal people tell us how they have been wronged and to hear them describe the vision they hold for their future and our future together” (Engelstad and Bird 226). Also, Vowels says that “remaining an outsider, in certain ways, might be the most respectful way you engage with another culture” (87). There may indeed be specific things that Indigenous communities seek from non-Indigenous peoples such “Canadian people must continue to push their governments to sit down with First Nations and negotiate a just and acceptable solution, to reflect what the Canadian polls say Canadian people want” (Engelstad and Bird 226). However, these paths of engagement must stem from the needs that these communities voice themselves. And the changes in oneself and the words non-Indigenous peoples speak must echo that of these communities.

“Aboriginal peoples themselves who have invited the rest of Canada to begin a new journey with them. This book has demonstrated that despite pain and despite living with the day-to-day reality of shattered lives, aboriginal peoples are offering non-aboriginal Canadians – their oppressors – an invitation to start anew” (Engelstad and Bird 225). Often it is more appropriate to disengage when we are not welcomed as outsiders. Yet when given the

invitation, we must take up the offer to actively engage with these challenges in a collaborative method.

In addition, being conscious of your own positionality crucial because it can influence the powerdynamics of the ways you may decide to voice. Dr Gaertner speaks to his own positionality as a white, non-Indigenous, able-bodied male which holds a lot of power. He also describes how “[his] body inflect how discourse happens in room”, speaking to how his positionality changes power dynamics of dialogue and spaces when engaging. Understanding one’s positionality is key in voicing appropriately in specific contexts as well as knowing how one may be unintentionally engaging in the situations simply by being present among other people.

Regardless of whether we voice and engage, we must continue to find ways to be responsible or ownership of what has happened in the past. We must continue to consider “the community you live in has some influence over the ways you conceive of what taking responsibility is and who bears that responsibility” (de Costa and Clark207). Dr Gaertner says that sharing stories is something that can be done to continue to voice and says that it is hard to hate someone after hearing their stories as through the process of sharing, you can go past the stereotypes, hate and anger. Wallace speaks to the importance of recounting individual and collectives histories as it is “a facet of building trust and relationship at the community level” (Wallace, 152). He personally tries to pass on stories of his own through novels or film recommendations so the conversation is not central to himself. Perhaps at a deeper level, it is not only sharing stories but sharing love for others. Nason describes “the profound forms of love motivate Indigenous women everywhere to resist and protest, to teach and inspire, and to hold accountable both Indigenous and non-Indigenous allies to their responsibilities to protect the values and traditions that serve as the foundation for the survival of the land and Indigenous peoples” (Nason). Perhaps it is love that is needed to help to bring people together and inspire a willingness to engage for one another.

In this essay, we explore five principles of engagement and provide evidence from multiple examples of where these can be seen. Although it is important to be conscious of these principles, the way in which we engage should not be limited to these principles as the complexity of these issue undoubtedly brings forth more areas of consideration. Regardless, we must continue to collaborate with Indigenous communities in order to help rebuild relationships

that have tainted the past in order to move forward in solidarity. As non-Indigenous people living on Indigenous lands, we must strive to be more respectful, inclusive, humble, engaged and allowing of freedom for people who have had to bear through the oppressive colonial system. There needs to be solidarity in “striving together to break divisive perceptions of suspicion, racism and intolerance. And solidarity is about working together tirelessly to transform structures that oppress, push down, and destroy. Indeed, solidarity is about coming to see that the aboriginal and non-aboriginal quests for a better Canada are inextricably bound together” (Engelstad and Bird 227). Although it is not an easy task and not a straight path, I am hopeful for a future where Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples can live together harmoniously.

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