

**White Educators: How We Can Meaningfully and Respectfully Incorporate Indigenous
Knowledge Into Our Classrooms and Pedagogy**

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My name is Zoe Armstrong and this short, 1 episode podcast is for the completion of my final project for the course of ETEC 521 - Indigeneity, Technology and Education. I will discuss the ways in which white educators, specifically in the kindergarten to grade 12 public school system, can meaningfully and respectfully incorporate Indigenous knowledge into their classrooms and teaching practice. Citations are provided in the transcript of the podcast but will not be voiced out loud throughout the episode. A full reference list is provided at the end of the transcript.

Introduction

Before beginning, I would like to provide context as to where I am joining you from through a land acknowledgement. Throughout this course, I have learnt the extreme importance of place for Indigenous people and so it feels right to share the place I currently am. I live in Cochrane Alberta which is on Treaty 7 territory. This land belongs to the Métis, the Blackfoot, the Stoney and the Tsuut'ina peoples. These peoples have made this land their home from time immemorial and as a white settler, in the spirit of reconciliation, I am grateful to live, work and play on this land each and everyday.

In the Alberta Education Teaching Quality Standard (TQS) document, the fifth standard is titled, "Applying Foundational Knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit" and states, "A teacher develops and applies foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit for the benefit of all students." (Alberta Education, 2020, p. 6). As a sixth grade public school teacher, I am mandated to follow and adhere to the TQS here in Alberta. When beginning my career 3 years ago, this was one of the most challenging standards for me. As a white educator, with very

little knowledge of my own about Indigenous peoples, I felt stuck in how to bring this standard to life in my classroom in meaningful and respectful ways. For this reason, among many others, I realized that my own reconciliation journey needed to further develop.

Sylvia Duckworth (2020) created an awesome resource called the Wheel of Power/Privilege and it asks viewers to place themselves in different categories for how they experience the world around them. It indicates how much power or privilege an individual moves through the world with. There are many categories but some include wealth, housing, skin color, citizenship, ability and sexuality. Before continuing on, I'd like to acknowledge that I sit nearest the point of privilege for almost all of these categories. This privilege has allowed me to experience the world very differently than many others. Acknowledging my privilege is but one step in my reconciliation journey, how I choose to act on that privilege is another very important step that I am always working on.

There are 4 Calls to Action in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission that are specifically about Education for Reconciliation and as of 2021, none of these Calls to Actions had been completed (Jewell & Mosby, 2021). These Calls to Action request that there be specific age appropriate curriculum on residential schools created and released for kindergarten to grade 12 students, they request that teacher training related to teaching Indigenous content be provided and that adequate funding for Aboriginal schools be provided, among many other crucial acts (Truth and Reconciliation Commission, 2015). As educators, we are servants of the public. It is our duty to serve the young people in our classrooms and to do this, we must take our own action for reconciliation in implementing Indigenous content. It is evident that the support from government authorities is slow moving and there is no time to wait.

Barriers to Implementation

This section here will discuss the barriers for implementation, the reasons why these crucial topics and discussions don't happen in every classroom. To begin this section I would like to tell a story of my own experience with these barriers. In my undergraduate degree, one of the mandatory courses I needed to graduate was called EDU 211 - Aboriginal Education and Contexts for Professional and Personal Engagement. It was a newer course to the Education program at the University of Alberta and all I had heard from fellow students was that it was really hard to get through. I remember people warning me, "get ready to get told you're a racist because you're white." I was nervous going in and had already built up some walls against professors I had never even met. Prior to this course, I had had very little exposure to Indigenous people, content or ways of knowing. My own experience in school had not exposed me to any of these topics. Throughout the course I was very challenged. I learnt more about colonization through that course than I did in any social studies classroom. We had to participate in 3 experiential components where I got to listen to the stories of an Elder, I got to take a walk through Edmonton's River Valley with Dr. Dwayne Donald, one of our professors as he told stories about the land and I got to participate in a smudging ceremony. I left the course with eyes wide open, realizing I had a lot of work to do. Flash forward to today and I continue to sit in this work. I've realized how incredibly lucky I was to have taken this course, to have learnt from the professors I had and to have participated in such important ceremonies for Indigenous peoples.

I have been in a place where I barely knew what a residential school was. I have journeyed now to a place where I feel responsibility to continue to learn and to share these learnings with those around me both personally and professionally. Reconciliation is a journey for all of us and as Nikki Sanchez shares in her 2019 Ted Talk, "decolonization is for everyone." If this is true, why can it be so difficult to implement Indigenous knowledge into our classrooms?

As a profession, it is important to understand where educators are at, in order to help them move forward. Niigaan Sinclair, an Anishinaabe associate professor at the University of Manitoba shares, “I think there’s probably no one more up for the task. They need to be empowered and resourced, but I believe in teachers. I always believe in teachers,” (CBC Radio, 2019). In a 2019 article, *Unreserved* from CBC Radio discusses some of the reasons why non-Indigenous educators don’t feel comfortable or confident enough to engage in Indigenous content with their students. Some of these reasons include that they are afraid of getting it wrong and that they don’t know what they don’t know (CBC Radio, 2019). What other barriers are educators experiencing?

As part of this final project, I created a short survey and sent it out to a number of my colleagues. One of the questions on this survey asked them what barriers they felt when trying to incorporate Indigenous content into their pedagogy. My colleagues shared there weren't enough professional development opportunities, they feared not knowing enough and in turn making assumptions that weren't true. They worried about being authentic and genuine, about students getting defensive about being settlers. Lastly, and one that I think often goes undiscussed is that they themselves were not taught about these things in school so they've never had it appropriately modeled for them. Though these barriers are real and true, they cannot become excuses. As Justice Murray Sinclair shares, “...education, or what passed for it, got us into this situation, and education is what will lead us out,” (Freeman, McDonald & Morcom, 2018).

Appropriation vs. Appreciation

One of the most common barriers to implementation when it comes to Indigenous content is that educators want to be genuine. They want to deliver quality experiences that are authentic, meaningful and respectful. One of the most important aspects to understand in order to do this is

the difference between cultural appropriation and cultural appreciation. The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (ETFO) released a document in 2019 titled, *Cultural Appropriation vs. Appreciation*. They define cultural appropriation as “taking and using Indigenous images, ideas, knowledge and material for purposes that hurt or damage the Indigenous community from which it belongs,” (Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, 2019, p. 9). ETFO (2019) describes cultural appreciation as using knowledge “to benefit, build and partner with the Indigenous community from where it comes from,” (p. 9).

One way to support ourselves in truly understanding the difference between appropriation and appreciation is “to constantly self-reflect” on our own culture and identity (Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario, 2019, p. 16). This piece of advice is echoed in a 2020 article from Grant Loveless who shares that “through self-reflection and evaluation, you will be better able to understand differences and determine what is important in cultures across the world.” In this course, we were tasked with reflecting on this concept exactly. Myself along with so many of my classmates felt that it was deeply important to be in touch with one's own culture in order to engage with another. This was a rather profound moment of realization for me as I had not spent a lot of time self-reflecting on my own culture. In order for educators to meaningfully integrate Indigenous content into their own practice, they need to be more in touch with their own culture.

For educators who are just beginning their reconciliation and decolonization journeys, one of the simplest ways to incorporate Indigenous knowledge into their classrooms is through Indigenous resources. This being said, it can be very easy to go wrong when it comes to resources. The Elementary Teachers' Federation of Ontario (2019) created a checklist for individuals to ensure that the resources they are choosing to use exercise cultural appreciation and not appropriation. A few of the questions on this checklist include:

- “Was the resource developed with the Indigenous community?” (p. 19)
- “Does the resource credit an Indigenous artist and/or community?” (p. 19)
- “Are you as the educator the best person to deliver this content?” (p. 19)
- “Can you position yourself as a learner and participate alongside your class?” (p. 19)

These are the types of questions that we need to be asking ourselves constantly when it comes to Indigenous content in our classrooms. These are the types of questions that will help us to decipher between appropriation and appreciation.

Meaningful and Respectful Implementation

To begin this section, I would like to draw our attention back to the Teaching Quality Standard document in Alberta that was discussed at the beginning. Again, it states, “A teacher develops and applies foundational knowledge about First Nations, Métis and Inuit for the benefit of all students,” (Alberta Education, 2020, p. 6). For the benefit of all students. When making Indigenous content meaningful and respectful, it is important to understand that it is not just for Indigenous students that we are prioritizing this in our classrooms. Incorporating this content is a way for all students to build empathy and understanding. *Weaving Ways* is a document designed by the Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortia Education for Reconciliation team (2018) in collaboration with a community of teachers and Elder Bruce Starlight of the Tsuu’atina Nation. This resource provides strategies on how to incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing into classrooms and schools. They discuss how meaningful teaching and learning opportunities should “weave together Indigenous ways of knowing with Western pedagogical practices for the benefit of all students and our collective journey towards reconciliation,” (Alberta Regional Professional Development Consortia, 2018, p. 3). To meaningfully and respectfully implement

Indigenous content into our classrooms, we need to understand that it is truly for the benefit of everyone in our community.

So, as white educators who understand the importance of this implementation and who understand the difference between appropriation and appreciation, how do we do so respectfully and meaningfully? Firstly, we need to understand that it is going to take time (CBC Radio, 2019). I feel as though my reconciliation journey started in 2015, when I took that Indigenous Education course in my undergraduate degree. It is now seven, almost eight years later and I feel as though I'm still just scratching the surface of all the history there is to know. I began by following more Indigenous content creators on social media, then I started signing up for more professional development opportunities on the topic. Then I started reading books by Indigenous authors who were sharing the stories of their lived experiences. I began implementing Indigenous content into my classroom through posters and stories. Some of the time I would feel uncomfortable however as Michelle Fenn shares in her 2020 article titled *Engaging with Indigenous Knowledge as a Non-Indigenous Educator*, "We can't avoid teaching about residential schools because we don't feel *comfortable*." She also shares that her Indigenous educator friends say, "the worst mistake that non-Indigenous educators can make is to do nothing," (Fenn, 2020). We ask our students to take chances, step outside of their comfort zones and learn new things every single day. We need to be asking the same things of ourselves.

Nicol, Archibald and Baker (2013) discuss ways in which we can move towards culturally responsive teaching as a means to respectfully engage with Indigenous content and students. They share that we need to "move away from teaching about cultural heritage as a subject in the curriculum to using local culture as a basis for educational decisions and activities," (p. 75). Do you know the local culture of your community? Often our curriculums are

hyper focused on developing the “global citizen” when our students hardly know about what goes on in their own backyard. If we are not prepared to teach about local knowledge, who can we reach out to that could provide that experience for our students? McGregor (2012b) says that “For non-Indigenous staff: this work calls for a careful balance of respect and sensitivity in listening as well as willingness to actively engage in discussions about responsibility, compensation and reconciliation,” (p. 287). Who can we as educators learn from, remembering that these individuals providing this education for us and our students need to be compensated accordingly. To meaningfully and respectfully engage with Indigenous content as white educators, in our classrooms, local knowledge needs to be attained. I’ve heard from many Indigenous educators that learning about the land in which you reside is a powerful way to move towards reconciliation and decolonization. So, whose land are you on?

When developing a pedagogy for reconciliation Freeman, McDonald and Morcom (2018) share the significance of realizing “that the education system has been used to rob Indigenous people of their languages, their cultures and their communities.” As discussed previously by Justice Sinclair, education is what got us into this mess. Educators need to work with Indigenous peoples and communities rather than trying to speak for them as our education system often tries to do (Freeman, McDonald & Morcom, 2018). Ensuring that Indigenous voices and experiences are amplified allows for Indigenous students to see themselves represented and for non-Indigenous students to learn about the land’s first and continued inhabitants. As we have discussed and read throughout this course, Indigenous content is not just for history class, it belongs in all subjects as it affects our present and our future. Marker (2015) shares that “colonization is framed as an aspect of a past that is distant from the present moment, not as a dark legacy that requires societal and policy changes toward restitution and restoration,” (p. 12).

Part of our duty as white educators working to implement Indigenous perspectives and decolonize our education system is to reframe the conversation around colonization from being an Indigenous issue, to being a Canadian issue. Meaningfully and respectfully implementing Indigenous perspectives is one of the ways this can be done.

Conclusion

The reality is that educators have a large responsibility. As white educators, to meaningfully and respectfully incorporate Indigenous content into our classrooms and pedagogy we must too be on our own journeys of reconciliation and decolonization. There is no one right way to do this. In a 2016 video from the Province of British Columbia on Aboriginal worldviews and perspectives in the classroom, Roy Henry Vickers shares this advice, “when you put your arms out and open them to the community, the community opens their arms to you.” We need to act now and either begin or continue to provide opportunities for our students to learn more about the land they live on through an Indigenous lens. We need to amplify the Indigenous voices in our own communities and we need to stay invigorated on our own reconciliation journeys in order to support the development of empathy and respect in our classrooms. Governor General of Canada Mary Simon, the first Indigenous Governor General ever shares this: “My view is that reconciliation is a way of life and requires work every day,” (Simon as quoted by Richardson, 2021). As white educators, working towards reconciliation, to meaningfully and respectfully incorporate Indigenous perspectives and content into our pedagogy, we are going to have to put in the work.

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