

Journey to Reconciliation

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ECS101: Education for Justice: Knowledge, Schooling & Society

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March 31, 2021

It's hard to find the words to accurately describe just how much I have learned in the past few months about Canada's journey to reconciliation with our Indigenous people. I have learned about their rich culture, about the mistreatment and oppression they've endured (and unfortunately continue to endure) their love and strength they share with their people, and their resilience as a community. After all of the guest speakers, lectures, research, and stories we've had the honour of experiencing this semester, I understand more clearly my role in our journey to reconciliation. It is to listen.

As a descendant of the European colonizers that came to Canada and took their land, it is not my place to say what they have lost as a community, but to illuminate the voices who have felt that loss. It has taken me a long time to realise this, because it has always been my best intention to be a good ally to the First Nations community, and make sure they know that I understand their struggles and want to help in whatever ways I can in supporting them. However, I don't fully understand. None of us do. How could we? Those are not experiences we have lived, but rather learned about in our classrooms. Those were not our children being taken from us and subjected to the horrors of residential schools. We were not the ones whose culture and language was stripped from us for decades, to the point where an entire generation has to relearn their roots in an act to take back their lives. What the Indigenous people of Canada endured was despicable, and although we are rallying behind them in support, we must continue to listen and hear the damages that were done by our people in order to learn from our mistakes and make sure we never repeat them.

As a future educator I will actively search for ways in which I can incorporate Indigenous voices into my classroom. As an arts teacher, I will have the opportunity to highlight fellow artists' work to my students, and it excites me to imagine the new discoveries I'll make when

researching First Nations artists work, as it is bound to bring new styles and insights to my class that I may have otherwise missed. I will be able to bring in perspectives from artists like Kent Monkman, Ruth Cuthand and others who visually represent colonialism. Another example of an artist who is rich in traditions, political perspective and not afraid to express her voice as an artist is Canadian Michif (Metis) visual artist Christi Belcourt, who was the winner of the 2016 Premier's Awards for Excellence in the Arts, as well as was the recent inspiration for Valentino's fashion line, let alone her artwork representing her stance of environmental concerns. It is my responsibility as an educator to create a diverse and welcoming environment for all of my students, and I believe representation in the classroom is a good start.

Pictured below: Christi Belcourt's 2015 acrylic painting, "*Aabaakawad Anishinaabewin*"

(Reviving Everything Anishinaabe).



For the aesthetic portion of my journey to reconciliation project, I chose to create a dance to the song, “River Valley” by Moxy Fruvous. I have been a competitive dancer since I was four years old, and I thought it was only fitting to express myself the best way that I know how, in the form of dance. Dancing allows me to convey emotions and thoughts when my words fail, and I couldn’t find the words to express just how disappointed I am with our governments lack of motivation to fix the boiling water mandate on reservations and First Nations land. The song's lyrics talk about how the community's water is contaminated and no longer safe to drink, but rather than make the corporations take responsibility for contaminating the water, everyone chooses to turn a blind eye to the issue and allow them to continue to benefit from the corporation's irresponsible and devastating actions in the name of progress and economy. As soon as I heard it I knew it was a perfect fit for my project, and I wore my shirt in the video that says, “Protect Our Waters” although it is hard to make out on the video, I wanted to include it in order to further drive home the intention of the dance. The link provided below will take you to my Vimeo account, where you can watch my performance.

<https://vimeo.com/manage/videos/530465093>

After learning about water protection and youth activist Autumn Peltier, I knew I had to create something that would do her story justice. Autumn is the sixteen year old Chiefwater Commissioner for the Anishinabek Nation. She received global recognition in 2016 after her plea to Canadian Prime Minister Justin Trudeau to protect the water. Autumn's ferocity in standing up for what she believes in, and not allowing herself to be silenced is beyond inspirational, especially for such a young woman. It inspired me to create my dance, and I only hope that one day I can be as brave and fierce as she is.

I had never thought of our education system as being a product of colonization before this course. Not because it didn't make sense to me, but because this is the only form of schooling I have ever known. Only after witnessing the lectures provided in this class did I realize how influenced our education is by European standards. In the lectures, "A Relational Approach to Decolonizing Education: Working with the Concepts of Invitation and Hospitality" and, "Decolonizing Educational Relationships: Space, Place, and Boundaries" by Fatima Pirbhai-Illich, we got to dive in deeper to our colonial history, and begin to explore how we can start to decolonize the classroom. Before we could begin to understand how to decolonize our education system, we had to first understand what colonization was, and how it affected our schooling.

Colonization is the act of "taking possession of lands, minds, bodies, culture, languages, and so on" (Fatima, 2020). Which is exactly what we did with the education system here in Canada. The colonizing systems and structures created involve the concepts of "otherness" and have a clear power dynamic between the students and the teachers. We see this power dynamic with the placement of the teachers at the front of the classrooms, usually standing, and the students in rows, seated in their individual desks. The teacher holds all of the power in the classroom, and although they are the ones educating our younger generations and trying to create brighter futures so it is important we listen to them, this can create an unsettling or unwelcome environment for some students and groups of minorities.

The educators I know now, and those I had the pleasure of learning from growing up, would never intentionally make anyone feel unwelcome or as if they were not equal to the other students in the class, however it is very much like the judicial system in Canada. Although our teachers and police officers may not be inherently racist themselves, these professions were built

on the grounds of systemic racism. An example of this is when I referenced ‘otherness’ earlier in this essay.

According to the Oxford dictionary, otherness is described as, “the quality or fact of being different”. In Fatimas lecture she talks about ‘othering discourses’, stating that it is, “Hidden under the rhetoric of liberalism, inclusion, care and responsibility” which makes it “hard to think or be otherwise; renders otherness unintelligible to mainstream” (Fatima, 2020). This could be incredibly harmful to those who don’t; celebrate the same holidays as their fellow classmates, practice different religions, or speak different languages. What made me truly open my eyes to how our education system is not inclusive to everyone, and is in fact partial to a particular group of people, was when Fatima mentioned that she was available December 25 if anyone was needing extra help. Our school division growing up always had Christmas holidays scheduled into the scholastic calendar, but not everyone celebrates Christmas in the same way, or on the same dates. Yet, those are the only dates acknowledged by the school system.

My hope as a future educator is to create a supportive, respectful, and safe environment for all of my students. I will make it a norm in my classroom to ask all of my students what they celebrate, and when they celebrate it, so we as a class can honour and learn about it together. I will do my best to be mindful of other people's religions and cultures, so they can feel as though they can approach me about anything. It is my responsibility as a teacher, to create a safe and hospitable space for all of my students.

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