Progress by Design: Indigenous Knowledge and Instructional Design - A Way Forward

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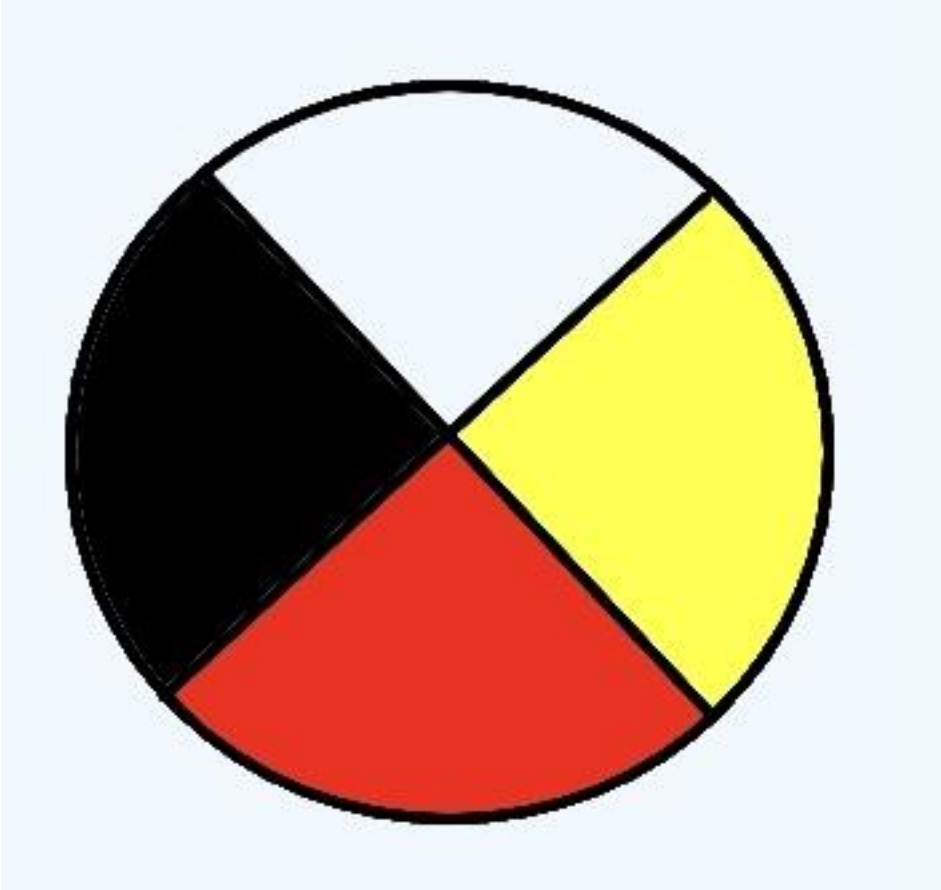
Prepared for the Canadian Association of Graduate Students



SEMINAR INFORMATION

Wednesday, January 24, 2024

Charles Hall, Ontario Tech University

12:00-13:30

Time	Event	Speaker(s)
12:05-12:10	Welcome Land Acknowledgement	Ted Christou Ashlee Quinn Hogan
12:05-12:10	Opening Remarks Introduction of Guest Speaker	Osman Hamid Carla Cesaroni
12:10-13:10	Seminar on Indigenous Instructional Design	Mark Sayers
13:10-13:30	Graduate Student Discussion	Graduate students

FACILITATORS AND PARTICIPANTS

Organizer

Dr. Carla Cesaroni, Associate Dean, School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies

Graduate Student Facilitators

Victoria Baker, PhD student, Criminology and Social Justice
Ashlee Quinn-Hogan, PhD student, Criminology and Social Justice

Seminar Leader

Mark Sayers, PhD student, Faculty of Education

Attendees

Beverly Allison, PhD student, Criminology and Social Justice
Jessica Arevalo, MA student, Criminology and Social Justice
Emily Cauduro, PhD student, Criminology and Social Justice
Cassandre Dion Lariviere, PhD student, Forensic Psychology
Jennifer Francis, PhD student, Criminology and Social Justice
Victoria Ginsley, PhD student, Criminology and Social Justice
Jose Ibarra Gomez, PhD student, Criminology and Social Justice
Erika Grogan-Graham, PhD student, Faculty of Education
Larissa Janssen, MA student, Criminology and Social Justice
Mckenzie Morton, MA student, Criminology and Social Justice
Corina Picco, MSc student, Forensic Psychology
Kristina Shatokhina, PhD student, Forensic Psychology
Sydney Spyksma, MSc Student, Forensic Psychology
Jessica Trinier, PhD student, Faculty of Education
Shelly Windsor, MA student, Faculty of Education
Joseph Young, MA student, Social Innovation and Practice

Senior Administrative Staff/Attendees

Ted Christou, Dean, School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies
Osman Hamid, Director of Entrepreneurship and Creativity

INTRODUCTION[1]

Canadian academic institutions' infrastructure, standards, and practices have long created and reinforced a divide between Indigenous and Western learning methods and values. The Province of Ontario is currently in a unique position where universities and colleges are beginning to recognize the need to integrate Indigenous culture and knowledge as essential components of the academic experience. However, one of the key ideas that we learned from our Indigenous seminar leader Mark Sayers, is that Western universities do not have the physical infrastructure to support Indigenous pedagogies such as talking circles or sharing circles (Sayers, 2024).

The incorporation of Indigenous cultures, teachings, and worldviews presents an alternative to traditional knowledge systems found within academic institutions and creates a space that is accessible, liberating, and healing for both Indigenous students and faculty members (Hanson & Danyluk, 2022; Sayers, 2024; Wemigwans, 2016). Indigenous knowledge encompasses a series of cultural traditions, values, and belief systems that are customarily imparted to younger generations through storytelling by community elders (Sayers, 2024; Wemigwans, 2016). Indigenous knowledge diverges from Western knowledge in that it is often personalized and tied to the speaker's integrity, familiarity, and perceptions and aims to connect economic, cultural, political, spiritual, ecological, and material forces and conditions (Sayers, 2024; Wemigwans, 2016).

While many scholars have pointed toward decolonization as a stepping stone toward making academic institutions more reflective of Indigenous ways of interacting and learning, there is budding recognition that this may not initiate the meaningful change sought after (Martin et al., 2020; Sayers, 2024). Indigeneity is contingent upon locations in specific spaces and times, meaning that Indigenous views cannot be homogenized or generalized (Martin et al., 2020; Sayers, 2024). As a result, there is no standardized way to approach decolonization, given that it will look different for each Indigenous group (Martin et al., 2020; Sayers, 2024). Bearing this in mind, as our seminar leader advised us, an emergent group of scholars have argued that the way forward is to create novel spaces (such as online spaces) that recognize Indigenous knowledge as equally important and valid as traditional academic knowledge (Sayers, 2024).

The digital world is a platform that offers a unique opportunity to facilitate a culturally sensitive learning environment by including Indigenous cultural references such as art and language (Wemigwans, 2016). One example of a digital resource that has begun to impart Indigenous knowledge is FourDirectionsTeachings.com[2]. The knowledge within this resource is derived from respected elders and traditional teachers, representing what can be considered a

[1] The framework and key ideas for this report come from what we learned and were taught by seminar leader Mark Sayers and his research.

[2] https://www.fourdirectionsteachings.com/

"digital bundle" - an electronic collection of objects regarded as sacred and held with care and ceremony (Wemigwans, 2016).

In contemplating the theme "Progress by Design", we invited an Indigenous educator to guide our seminar and subsequent discussion. This decision was made as we believe that progress involves designing academic curricula and research that centres on Indigenous knowledge and opens up space for Indigenous voices. It is important to note that the content included within this report reflects an Ojibway research paradigm that draws upon information derived from the Medicine Wheel and the Seven Grandfather Teachings (Sayers, 2024). This research paradigm is rooted in the concept of holistic stability, which aims to create a balance between mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual health (Sayers, 2024).

DESIGNING THE SEMINAR

Upon receiving the request to participate in the Canadian Association of Graduate Students SSHRC-funded seminar series, the Associate Dean of the School of Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies (SGPS) reached out to all programs in the Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities and the Faculty of Education to encourage a cross-disciplinary gathering of graduate students. Sixteen graduate students expressed interest in the initiative and came together on Wednesday, January 24, 2024, to engage in a formal discussion. The seminar leader shared his research titled "An Ojibway Cultural Presence Framework (OCPF): Creating a culture-specific instructional design framework that promotes (w)holistic well-being, cultural identity, and nationhood for Ojibway-based post-secondary online education" (Sayers, 2024).

To honour Indigenous culture, the seminar was structured as a talking circle. A talking circle is a pedagogical approach in Indigenous knowledge systems that consists of the ontological, axiological, and epistemological principles of the Ojibway people (Hanson & Danyluk, 2022;Sayers, 2024). It is an Indigenous paradigm that has all the same components of the western tradition (Sayers, 2024). In fact, it involves more in that traditional protocols are followed (Sayers, 2024). Talking circles comprise protocols such as allowing one person to speak at a time, valuing each person's voice, and encouraging participants to speak from their positions, experiences, and feelings (Hanson & Danyluk, 2022). Upon entering the classroom reserved for the seminar, the inability of academic institutions to accommodate Indigenous learning practices became starkly apparent. The room contained a series of long tables and chairs arranged in tight rows, which posed an obstacle to forming a talking circle. The seminar organizer, leader, and facilitators subsequently had to rearrange the room to attempt to imitate a talking circle, creating what resembled more of a talking rectangle.

The seminar began with a round of introductions guided by the passing of an eagle feather. Participants were asked to provide their name, program of study, and any other information they felt comfortable sharing before ending their turn by saying *meegwetch* (thank you). The seminar leader described the significance of passing the eagle feather, noting that it

was both a ceremonial component of talking circles and a source of healing and comfort for participants (Sayers, 2024).

The seminar leader's talk centred on his work on Ojibway instructional design, commencing with the importance and significance of online cultural representations such as Ojibway symbols, images, personal stories, and pedagogical representation guided by traditional Ojibway protocols (Sayers, 2024). He noted how elders contribute to the pedagogy by providing appropriate content, lessons, and guidance about when and how particular lessons should be taught. He also indicated that a central goal of Ojibway teaching was to raise each other up, making the wellness of students a vital objective of Indigenous instructional design (Sayers, 2024). He then highlighted key differences between Indigenous research methods and Western research methods (Sayers, 2024). The seminar concluded with an open discussion where participants could share their thoughts, ideas, and insights. In keeping with Indigenous talking circle protocols, one person was permitted to speak at a time while the other participants held space for their voice, experience, and feelings.

DISCUSSION

This report will focus on the overarching ideas and themes that ultimately guided the discussion following the seminar presenter's leadership. While many of these ideas directly relate to creating Indigenous instructional design, these suggestions may help identify novel ways to improve Western academic institutions.

THEME #1: MOVING FROM DECOLONIZING INSTITUTIONS TO CREATING NEW INSTITUTIONS

Decolonization, in simple terms, calls for dismantling unjust practices and requires the creation of alternative spaces and ways of knowing (Ashar, 2015; Kessi, 2020). While decolonizing practices appear progressive in principle, this progress is only sometimes translated into practice. During the seminar, it was suggested that the most prominent problem with decolonization is that it tends to occur ***inside*** Western institutions, presenting the risk that Indigenous knowledge, values, and protocols are merely being superimposed over existing institutional practices rather than being regarded as a unique framework that occurs ***outside*** Western institutions (Sayers, 2024). This is one reason that some Indigenous researchers and students such as our seminar leader are moving to online spaces in hopes of creating a space that follows the traditional protocols of their peoples. It can be a way to teach Indigenous language, history, culture that truly reflect Indigenous pedagogy (Sayers, 2024).

Perhaps the largest driving force behind the recognition that decolonization is failing to deliver its intended goals is feedback gathered from Indigenous youth and elders who are currently navigating the academic system as students, faculty members, and service providers. One potential way to give Indigenous students and faculty members a space in educational institutions is to utilize online platforms such as Google Meet (Sayers, 2024). The seminar leader discussed how online platforms might be able to be modified to better align with Indigenous

ways of learning, such as having participants arranged in a circle configuration when they sign into an online course, representing a talking circle (Sayers, 2024).

THEME #2: IMPLEMENTING INDIGENOUS INSTRUCTIONAL DESIGN

Classrooms in academic institutions are structured in accordance with a configuration that places the instructor behind a podium at the front of the room and the students in rows behind them. This design often reinforces a hierarchy that places the instructor in a position of power as the ***knower*** and students in a position of dependence as the ***learners*** (Sayers, 2024). Indigenous methods challenge this hierarchical structure by recognizing that the instructor and students are ***active contributors*** to knowledge production, formation, and dissemination (Dei, 2000: Sayers, 2024). One participant recalled a seminar that utilized an approach similar to a talking circle and discussed how this approach provided a more enjoyable learning experience by encouraging students to get to know one another and form a classroom community. Another participant stated that this type of classroom environment enabled them to become more reflexive through the ability and willingness to share their beliefs, judgements, and values with their instructor and classmates. In turn, this presents the opportunity to create a sense of reciprocity among students and faculty members as each person has the chance to speak and share.

The seminar leader highlighted the significance of Ontario Tech University recently recognizing that Indigenous knowledge, knowledge production, and ways of knowing were equal in standing to traditional academic knowledge (Sayers, 2024). Some participants argued that despite this, they believed that tension still exists around who is allowed to create knowledge, what counts as knowledge, and who is allowed to be recognized as an “expert” or in Indigenous terms, a person of knowledge (there is no term for expert in Indigenous traditions) (Sayers, 2024). A clear point of discussion amongst the group was the feeling that, despite this progress, Indigenous students and faculty members often find it challenging to feel as though their culture is represented within the very design of academic institutions. When looking at university and college hallways, classrooms, and communal spaces, it is clear that these areas often need more references to Indigeneity. The seminar leader suggested that to foster a more inclusive environment, academic institutions should include Indigenous art, pictures, and frames to promote and incorporate this cultural presence both in person and in an online environment (Sayers, 2024).

THEME #3: THE VALUE OF STORYTELLING

Storytelling is an essential aspect of Indigenous instructional design that promotes ***collective learning and relationships with others*** (Sayers, 2024). This approach to teaching allows teachers and learners to co-construct and co-design the learning process, as well as the knowledge being shared (Barcham, 2021). During the seminar, it was illustrated that academic institutions could hinder the ability of Indigenous students and faculty members to engage in storytelling, often as a result of strict timeframes that leave little room for the conversation to

unfold organically. One participant spoke about how they found this to be a relatable concern in their teaching practice, as they struggled with the fact that they could not always answer questions posed by students or promote in-depth classroom discussions due to the constraints placed on covering required course content and learning objectives. Similarly, another participant commented on how instructional components such as course objectives, curricula, and time restrictions set on Indigenous students and faculty members in the classroom can be a source of stress. They noted that Indigenous perspectives involve sharing one's truth and stories, which do not always fit into predetermined guidelines on content or time, making even some of the best intentions to replicate Indigenous practices fall short in their execution. Once again, participants noted that this alternative approach to learning raises fundamental questions about knowledge, including what knowledge is, who possesses knowledge, and the best method of sharing knowledge.

Indigenous elders play a crucial role in facilitating the learning process through storytelling. Stories are rooted in tradition, culture, and life experience, and there is often an appropriate time and place for these to be told (Sayers, 2024). However, as our seminar leader made evident, academic institutions rarely place Indigenous elders in positions where they are appropriately compensated for their work in sharing these stories or guiding students and faculty members through their educational journeys (Sayers, 2024). He noted that Indigenous elders are commonly paid through stipends classified as service fees, which massively undervalue the work they do. His goal is to create a policy paper that promotes a national standard in terms of pay distribution which will apply across Canada and ensure equitable compensation for Indigenous elders.

THEME #4: INDIGENOUS RESEARCH METHODS

Basic to the dominant research paradigm is the concept of the individual as the source and owner of knowledge (Wilson, 2008). This is part of a Eurocentric view of the world in which the individual or object is the essential feature, which stands in stark contrast to an Indigenous worldview where relationships are an essential feature, and there is joint ownership in knowledge (Wilson, 2008; Sayers, 2024). The seminar leader talked about the place of the Medicine Wheel, the Seven Grandfathers Teachings, Indigenous oral traditions, and how he would conduct visitations in his local community (Sayers, 2024). Some of the participants talked about the fact that there are guidelines for conducting research ***on*** Indigenous people but wondered about the support and guidelines in place for research ***by*** Indigenous people. More specifically, participants questioned if research ethics boards were adequately equipped to review research by Indigenous researchers and whether they were in a position to judge Indigenous research methods. The feeling amongst Indigenous communities is that they are not adequate which is why they are developing their own ethical research frameworks (Sayer, 2024).

CONCLUSION

The structure of the seminar and subsequent discussion provided an opportunity for graduate students from various disciplines to come together due to a shared interest and desire to discuss opportunities for change and action within academia. The main themes of the seminar and discussion are summarized above. Based on these themes, it is clear that to progress forward, there is a need to question, evaluate, and restructure academic institutions as they currently exist (Sayers, 2024). Indigenous instructional design serves as an example of progressing by creating novel (online) spaces that promote new ways of designing educational curricula and research that centre on Indigenous knowledge and open space for Indigenous voices. Mark Sayers's framework (OCPF) is such an example in that seeks to create an alternative online platform to learn about Ojibway culture, language, and history (Sayers, 2024). Traditional Ojibway protocol is embedded in the framework (Sayers, 2024).

The overarching themes outlined in this report highlight the value of paving a way forward that recognizes Indigenous knowledge as equally important and as valid as traditional academic knowledge. There is a call from Indigenous youth, elders, and students to create new resources and institutions that support students regardless of their background, experiences, or challenges (Sayers, 2024). Moreover, there is a need to reshape classroom structures and processes, create a cultural presence, and not only to involve Indigenous elders in the teaching and learning process, but compensate them as is befitting their experience and extensive knowledge (Sayers, 2024).

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Note – the image on the front cover of this report was created by Mark Sayers.