



# Lessons Learned from Indigenizing a Media Program at an Ontario Community College

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## Abstract

In this paper, the authors reflect on a two-year journey to indigenize the program they have taught in at a community college in Ontario. These efforts necessitated their own education in Indigenous history and perspectives, as well as contemplation of the impact of colonialism on their own teaching. This reflection was combined with much consultation with the First Peoples Indigenous Centre at Durham College and research of other post-secondary efforts to indigenize curricula as part of a broader effort to implement some of the

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recommendations arising out of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. The work completed during this project also included a student focus group, educational workshops for non-Indigenous faculty and the creation of internal media assets featuring Indigenous themes. As well, this work led to the creation of a new compulsory course on Indigenous perspectives in contemporary media that has been added to the college's Broadcasting program. At the end of this project, the authors stress moral imperative of continuing this work to educate future generations of media professionals on the value of Indigenous culture and the importance of understanding the historical wrongs endured by Indigenous peoples.

## Background

In June, 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) released an executive summary of its findings, along with 94 Calls to Action. As educators who teach media courses at a community college in Ontario, Call to Action #86 caught our attention:

We call upon Canadian journalism programs and media schools to require education for all students on the history of Aboriginal peoples, including the history and legacy of residential schools, the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Treaties and Aboriginal rights, Indigenous law, and Aboriginal–Crown relations.

We immediately began to formulate a plan to address this specific call to action by indigenizing the program we were both teaching in\*. As media instructors who have a direct hand in training individuals who will become the

include designing digital literacy workshops and co-developing and teaching an international field course on social justice that was taught to Canadian students in Brazil.

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Phil Raby is a professor and program coordinator for the Broadcasting – Radio and Contemporary Media program at Durham College. Phil has an advanced diploma in Journalism, a Bachelor of Education (Adult) and a Master of Education. Besides the current project on Indigenizing the Broadcasting Curriculum, Phil has been part of several research projects involving college to university pathways, mobile journalism and virtual news production technology.

next generation of Canadian storytellers, we felt an immense responsibility to ensure that the work of our graduates, as media professionals, will be informed by the truthful accounting of the shared history of Indigenous peoples and settlers in Canada. The program in which we teach is called Broadcasting – Radio and Contemporary Media. This program is taught at Durham College, a small community college located in Oshawa, Ontario. In this two-year program students learn how to create content for multiple platforms, which include radio, television and web. The first year of the program, which typically has an enrolment of 50-60 students, covers basic production and storytelling skills, while second year is dedicated to finessing those skills through more advanced training. Students in this program find employment at television and radio stations, production companies, non-profit organizations and in government. The program started in 2014 and since then courses offered have changed and/or been adjusted, based on not only student feedback, but also recommendations made by the Program Advisory Committee, which is composed of various internal and external stakeholders. Prior to 2016, the program did not have official instruction that introduced students to Indigenous cultures and histories, although one of the professors (Augusto Rodrigues) began introducing some information in an introductory course she taught on news writing for broadcast. Typically, the program has between two to four students who self-identify as Indigenous. We both have a background in journalism, having worked in print and TV for several years. Despite our cumulative years of experience in journalism, we recognized huge gaps in our knowledge when it came to historical and contemporary issues facing Indigenous

populations in Canada. We felt, first and foremost, that this lack of information needed to be addressed. As part of our re-education process, we also came to understand that we have adopted a way of being in the world that comes from studying, working and living day-to-day in a society where,

...European institutional frameworks, philosophy, historical assumptions, paradigms of scholarship and ways of knowing have not only dominated our institutions, but completely boxed out Indigenous knowledge, wisdom teachings, science and worldviews (Bopp, Brown & Robb, 2017, p. 2).

Before embarking on this effort, we recognized the need to decolonize our teaching practices, not only through self-directed learning, but also continuous reflection. To be frank, this has been difficult work as facing our inherent colonial perspectives, the way we see the world, is a constant and uncomfortable process. Nonetheless, it was work that needed to be done as we needed to understand what reconciliation means to ourselves personally, as well as in the context of the work we do before attempting to start the process of indigenizing course content. We also needed to ensure that as we worked on this project, it was impacted in the least possible ways by our inherent colonial viewpoints. We began reading books recommended to us on the effects of colonialism in Canada. As well, we read fiction and poetry written by Indigenous authors and watched documentaries on past and current issues affecting Indigenous peoples in Canada. We also attended as many workshops as we could at the First Peoples Indigenous Centre (formerly the Aboriginal Student Centre) at

Durham College. Augusto Rodrigues also completed two online courses focused on learning Indigenous perspectives, culture and histories within a Canadian context.

## Indigenization in Education: What does it mean?

What did we mean by stating that we wanted to indigenize the program in which we teach? This was a question that we could only address after having many conversations with the Indigenous advisors who were guiding us through this process and listening to the thoughts of Indigenous students who were enrolled in the program in which we teach. Answers to this question also came through our own research. Educational institutions in Canada have different ideas of what indigenization means and looks like when it is put into practice (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). Newhouse (2016) sees different phases to the indigenization process of an educational institution which include raising the enrolment numbers of Indigenous peoples at universities, embedding Indigenous cultural practices in the institution, bringing Indigenous knowledge into the institution as part of teaching and learning practices and then disseminating “Indigenous knowledge beyond its foundational area in Indigenous studies” (p. A7).

Similarly, Bopp et al. (2017) regard indigenization in education as not only the process of creating educational spaces where Indigenous peoples can succeed and flourish, but also “reframing knowledge production and transmission within the academy from an Indigenous perspective” (p. 2).

The literature also reveals the troubling token efforts being undertaken by educational institutions which

Greenwood, Leeuw, and Fraser (2008) describe as exploitative inclusivity. They state,

...should academic institutions genuinely be interested in accounting for Indigenous peoples and Indigeneity, every effort should be made to account for and value the varied ontologies and epistemologies embodied by Indigenous people and Indigeneity. In other words, it is not sufficient for an institution to recruit (and superficially support) Indigeneity while simultaneously maintaining expectations that Indigenous peoples conform to the demands and traditional contours of academic institutions. To do this in our estimation is to render the efforts of inclusivity exploitative. (p. 205)

As we explored indigenization of the program we teach in and began making changes to it, we knew unreservedly that we needed to ensure that this process was neither symbolic nor exploitive. We also needed to implement measures that were sustainable and would become a permanent part of the program. We adopted a definition of indigenization that meant embedding Indigenous knowledge and perspectives into all the courses taught in the program and to educate non-indigenous students on the true shared history of Indigenous peoples and settlers in Canada. In this process, students would understand the terrible and long-lasting impact of colonialism on Indigenous peoples in Canada while reflecting on how these events affect them, not only as future media professionals, but also as individuals. We also felt that current and future Indigenous students enrolled in our program would benefit from these changes as they would

feel that their cultural backgrounds are valued if they see it reflected positively and accurately in the lessons we are teaching. Another goal we had was to make the transmission of Indigenous knowledge a natural part of teaching, while improving all aspects of the program through indigenization.

## Embarking on Indigenization

In spring, 2016, we received funding through the Centre for Academic and Faculty Enrichment (C.A.F.E.) at Durham College to officially research and undertake the process of indigenizing the curricula in the Broadcasting program. The first step was to meet with Peggy Forbes and Julie Pigeon, the student advisors at the First Peoples Indigenous Centre, to explain what we were intending to do and to ask if they would be willing to guide and support us through this journey. Before beginning, we needed to feel secure that they felt comfortable with the steps we were taking. Thankfully, they were very gracious and supportive of our efforts, as well as being understanding of our limited knowledge of Indigenous culture, history and traditions. In the beginning, we researched what other institutions were doing in terms of indigenization, while also speaking to educators at other post-secondary schools who had either indigenized their courses or were beginning that process. We also examined how we could incorporate Indigenous Learning Outcomes (ILOs) into the outlines of the courses we teach. Confederation College, which has been at the forefront of indigenization among Canadian colleges, developed seven ILOs that have now been added to almost all their college programs (Confederation College, n.d.). However, in attempting to replicate this effort we encountered an unforeseen

difficulty with adding ILOs to all of the courses we were teaching in the Broadcasting program. Although we felt that we could teach these ILOs in the courses we were individually responsible for, and/or locate experts who could teach them in our courses, we could not make that assumption for the numerous part-time faculty members in the program. To address this roadblock, we organized a day-long workshop, to be delivered by an Indigenous educator, for all faculty teaching in the Broadcasting program. The workshop, which had an emphasis on developing curriculum that was indigenized, covered the following topics: Best Practices in Aboriginal Education, Reconciliation at the School Community Level and How Aboriginal Peoples transformed the world.

Unfortunately, none of the program's part-time instructors were able to attend the workshop and therefore ILOs were not added to the courses taught by those instructors. We felt this was a prudent course of action because of the concern that the part-time faculty would be missing the foundational knowledge in Indigenous history, perspectives and culture to teach these learning outcomes confidently. This in no part was the fault of the instructors, who being part-time faculty, were not paid to attend this workshop. We also began creating digital artifacts on Indigenous topics, such as smudging and traditional Indigenous medicines, with the intent of sharing them with other faculty. To help with the production of these artifacts, we hired two students to produce videos on topics suggested by the Indigenous student advisors. When a first draft of a digital production was created, we would show it to Julie or Peggy for feedback and recommended changes, if needed, based on their comments. A journalist, who is Indigenous, also assisted us with the production of a



short social media video which explained how media educators might indigenize their curriculum. As well, a focus group for Indigenous students in the Broadcasting and Journalism programs was organized to find out their perspectives on Indigenization. Although eight students were invited, only two took part. Despite this, the information they provided was still enlightening to us and informed not only the outcomes of the project, but also the recommendations that we made in a final report. Among the comments from both students was a caution that a measured and well-planned approach to Indigenizing the curricula should be implemented so that non-Indigenous students better understand the reasons for the changes and do not feel “hit over the head” with the new learning. Indigenous students interviewed also agreed on the need for the incorporation of Indigenous perspectives into the program and would serve as a resource if the appropriate opportunity arose. However, they also asked that they not be centered out or called upon by their instructors to be classroom experts unless spoken with beforehand.

## Outcomes of the project

By the time the funding for the project terminated in the fall of 2017, we had made changes to the program that we felt aligned with our goals of indigenization. Indigenous Learning Outcomes were added to eight of the courses we were teaching. However, we were worried that by adding the ILOs we were creating only temporary changes to the program as those learning outcomes might disappear as courses were assigned to new instructors. Therefore, we felt that a more permanent change would be to create a mandatory course on Indigenous histories, perspectives, culture and traditions

that could be taught to first-year students taking the program. Having this course become a permanent part of the program would not only ensure that the Indigenization efforts we had engaged in would have permanency, but also insure that we were meeting our responsibilities under the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action. We soon discovered, however, that adding a new course to an established program is not a simple change within the Ontario college system. An additional course must not only meet the program standards as dictated by Ontario's Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, but it must also fit within the existing credited hours for the program. Fortunately, the Broadcasting program was able to remove hours from a photography course that was already being modified from a six-hour hybrid class to a traditional three-hour laboratory class. This provided the additional hours needed without burdening new students with extra hours of study. This process still necessitated the completion of a Major Program Change application, which was presented to the college's Program Proposal Review Committee (PPRC) for review and recommendation for approval. The application was submitted in June of 2017 with a view to adding the course in the fall of 2018. The major change was approved the following month after a review of its merits and as a result, Indigenous Perspectives in Contemporary Media, a three-hour, three-credit course, was developed and is now being taught for the first time by Indigenous student advisor Peggy Forbes from Durham College's First Peoples Indigenous Centre.

In addition, the college's Centre for Academic and Faculty Enrichment (C.A.F.E) has announced its intention to hire an Indigenous scholar to work with

faculty who are indigenizing their outlines and to support reconciliatory education.

## Lessons Learned

Although we were given a year to complete this work, we recognize that reconciliation is an ongoing process that must continue beyond this project's conclusion. Our efforts have been fruitful, but our journey has just begun, and we feel many other programs need to follow suit if we are to honour the TRC's calls to action. We will continue to indigenize the Broadcasting program while we continue to decolonize our own teaching practices through continuous self-reflection and education. Here are some of the lessons we have learned to date:

- There is a need and a duty to acknowledge territorial lands and remind people of the importance of doing so when they fail to respect Indigenous peoples.
- Professors should strive to create an environment that encourages Indigenous students to share their culture and stories.
- Professors, both full- and part-time, should connect with their Indigenous centres and advisors at their colleges and universities. They should also attend Indigenous cultural workshops to learn as much as they can about the Indigenous community on campus and their traditions and customs.
- Professors should acknowledge the special insight and perspective of their Indigenous leaders on campus and let them guide and advise on all matters related to Indigenizing curricula.
- Before approaching elders or Indigenous leaders, professors and others should reach out to their Indigenous advisors for advice on how to approach

and request assistance and participation in any project.

- There is a need to find a common place (online or offline) where faculty who are engaging in indigenization can share what they are doing and create a set of unified best practices. In our case, there were other faculty who were also indigenizing components of their courses but we were not aware of each other's efforts.
- Continued and committed consultation with each college's Indigenous centre is a must to ensure that all steps in the process properly reflect Indigenous culture and fulfill the TRC's recommendations.
- College administrations must consistently model respect for Indigenous lands and culture to show a consistent message that will resonate with students and staff.

## Recommendations

For other post-secondary schools embarking on Indigenizing efforts, the following recommendations born of our efforts may be useful. In order to support faculty who wish to indigenize their programs, internal microsites can be a useful teaching and learning support to provide resources and media assets that can be used in instructional design or directly inside classrooms. Teaching and learning centres should also be encouraged to create a community of practice to support faculty embarking on indigenizing efforts. As well, all college staff (including part-time) should be required to take a mandatory workshop on Indigenous Cultural Safety and colleges should be encouraged to create culturally appropriate spaces (such as classrooms) for Indigenous teaching and learning. Faculty who are not

full-time should be compensated for their time when taking these workshops. In addition, it is critical that colleges hire more faculty and staff who are Indigenous and provide more financial and personnel support for Indigenous student centres so they can continue to expand their services.

## From Apology to Action

The pace of indigenization at colleges must continue at a faster pace. Charlene Bearhead (former Education Lead for the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation at the University of Manitoba) is urging institutions to move from apology to action (Bellrichard, 2015).

However, through our conversations with faculty who teach media courses in Canada, it has become apparent that, while there is a great interest in learning more on how to indigenize the programs in which they teach, there is also fear of making mistakes. We too felt and still feel this way at times but Julie Pigeon and Peggy Forbes have reminded us many times that it is better to make mistakes than to not act at all. Perhaps the most lasting lesson we have learned is that reconciliation in education must come from the heart and not from a desire to check a box. Administrators and faculty should want to indigenize their post-secondary institutions because it is the right thing to do and not because they are obligated by ministerial direction or social pressures. It is only by addressing these historical wrongs through education, post-secondary schools (media and otherwise), that a new generation of socially aware students can avoid the prejudices and mistakes of the past.

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