

“We Are All Relations”: An Indigenous Course Requirement (ICR) Experience

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Abstract

This mixed-methods study asked students, faculty, and staff what their experiences were with an interdisciplinary Indigenous Course Requirement (ICR) in its initial implementation in the 2016/17 academic year at The University of Winnipeg. Although participants had suggestions for how to improve course content, development, delivery, and support, there were more positive reactions to the ICR experience than negative. Themes that emerged from the positive learning experiences were the importance of relationships, respect, and a desire to work together towards reconciliation. Challenges that participants indicated were the pressure on Indigenous students to take on the role of token authority, lack of support systems and training for engaging in sensitive issues. There was consensus that racism and lack of knowledge exists and that education and relationships are key to changing stereotypes. A major challenge will be continued student opposition to ICRs.

Keywords: Indigenous Course requirement (ICR); Indigenization; racism; reconciliation; Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC); United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP)

Background

The University of Winnipeg (UW) is a medium-sized urban university with a student body of about 9,400 students where 13% of the student population self-identify as Indigenous (UWinnipeg Fast Facts, 2017). In the fall of 2016, The University of Winnipeg put into effect an Indigenous course requirement (ICR) as an interdisciplinary prerequisite for graduation for all university students (Indigenous Content Requirement, 2017). The goal of the ICR at UW is that all students across all disciplines learn basic knowledge about Indigenous people and culture (Indigenous Course Requirement, 2016). This is a brief history of how the ICR came into effect at UW. Students played an integral role in the process, and eventual implementation of the ICR and these are some of the events that led to the ICR inception.

In a ceremony in the fall of 2012, Wab Kinew, then director of Indigenous Inclusion at UW, presented Lloyd Axworthy, then President and Vice-Chancellor of UW, with a sacred Anishinaabe pipe as a “way to build bridges between the Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities” (Axworthy & Kinew, 2013). At the time, Idle No More movements marched their way onto main streets and front pages of newspapers across the country, reminding everyone “that this country began with co-operation between Indigenous and European peoples” (Axworthy & Kinew, 2013). The response garnered divided reaction “making supporters of some ‘average Canadians’ and drawing vehement and occasionally, vitriolic opposition from others” (Axworthy & Kinew, 2013). Indigenous peoples were standing up not only for themselves but for the benefit of all Canadians. Kinew and Axworthy (2013) saw the beginning of a new relationship and committed to “work toward mutually beneficial solutions. Let’s be divided no more.”

In February 2013, racist graffiti in a UW washroom targeted First Nations peoples, and disparaging comments about Idle No More appeared online. Axworthy and human resource officials took the actions seriously, expressed their apology, committed to revising the University’s respectful workplace policy, required staff to take workshops, and offered a seminar by Wab Kinew. The Aboriginal Students Council applauded the response indicating that Aboriginal students were not the only ones experiencing discrimination on campus, and that learning about mutual respect would benefit everyone (Graffiti at University of Winnipeg, 2013).

In 2015, *Maclean's* published Nancy Macdonald's article entitled "Welcome to Winnipeg: Where Canada's racism problem is at its worst." The city and University took these accusations seriously and again committed to working on what they recognized was indeed a problem. Although both Axworthy and Kinew had left the University by 2014 and 2016 respectively, the established commitment of Axworthy and Kinew's work combined with racist incidents on campus collectively contributed to the years of 2015-17 bringing major curricular changes to the University.

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) released the 94 Calls to Action to redress the previous wrongdoings to the Indigenous peoples of Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015). This was in an effort to rebuild relations with First Nations peoples (TRC, 2015). To incorporate Indigenous knowledge into coursework acknowledges that UW is located on Treaty One land in the heart of the Métis Nation (Indigenous Course Requirement, 2016) and takes the TRC's calls to action seriously.

The University of Winnipeg Student Association (UWSA) was aware of the political, social, and local climate and initially formed the ICR concept in response to national and local events. Through informal and formal discussions, debates, and research the UWSA proposed the course to the University's Senate. The new course requirement, first proposed during Axworthy's presidency, was approved by the Senate in November 2015 and in the fall of 2016 was implemented for all undergraduate students (Indigenous Course Requirement, 2016) with the support of Dr. Annette Trimbee, who succeeded Axworthy as President and Vice-Chancellor. In the 2016/2017 academic year, 27 unique courses with a total of 46 sections were offered across 9 different departments.

This study reports student, faculty, and staff response to the first year of the implementation of the ICR. The overarching research goal of the study was to learn about student, faculty and staff perceptions and experiences of the University of Winnipeg's Indigenous Course Requirement (ICR). In 2018/19, the course offerings expanded to include 78 courses in 17 different departments.

Data collection and recruitment

Multimodal data were collected during the winter of 2017. Data were collected through individual faculty and staff interviews, student surveys, and focus groups with students. Faculty and staff were recruited through direct contact with departments that offered ICR courses. Student survey participants were recruited through a mass email to all UW students that had taken an ICR course. Focus group participants were also recruited through the mass email that went to the same pool of students that received the survey invitation. This study received ethics permission from the University Human Research Ethics Board (UHREB).

Sample size, participants, and research analysis

Data were collected from three different stakeholder groups that were all directly impacted by the implementation of the new ICR courses: faculty, staff, and students.

- 10 faculty and staff from six departments participated in the individual 30-minute voice recorded interviews. The staff that were included in the research, were directly involved in assisting students in issues pertaining to the ICR courses.
- 164 students responded to a survey invitation sent to 1,230 students who had taken an ICR (13% response rate).
- 19 students participated in one of three 60-90-minute focus group discussions.

The data collected was analyzed using a method of hand coding. While reading the transcribed interviews and surveys, themes that emerged along with corresponding quotes were organized according to categories. Categories were added as new themes emerged. The Results and Discussion section highlights the prominent themes that emerged from the study.

Results and discussion

ICR student experience

The purpose of this study was to learn about faculty, staff, and student perception and experience of UW's Indigenous Course Requirement (ICR) that was implemented in September of 2016. Findings revealed that there is room for improvement in course content, development, delivery, and support, but there were more positive overall reactions to the ICR experience than negative. Although there were definitely polarized views on the ICR experience, more students indicated they had an experience that ranged from neutral to "wonderful." Neutral responses included students indicating that the class was the same as any other university class with nothing exceptional or unusual, to one of the best classes they took. Although some student experiences ranged from support in principle of the ICR, they stated they would like a stronger pedagogical approach. A few students expressed an antagonistic resistance going into the course and a very negative assessment of it going out.

Some of the positive emotions that students experienced in relation to the ICR experience included: understanding and respect gained in the course, the desire and need for reconciliation, support for the ICR, and gratitude for the doors it welcomed for honest conversations. The ICR garnered enthusiastic support from the majority, but also "vehement and vitriolic opposition" from a minority. People experience cognitive dissonance when new information that they learn is not psychologically consistent with their previous knowledge (Festinger, 1962). Frimer, Skitka & Motyl (2017) explain that cognitive dissonance causes discomfort and people avoiding exposure to information that creates a personal psychological clash is a self-defense mechanism. Further, "People have a fundamental need to feel mental synchrony with others" (Frimer, Skitka, & Motyl, 2017, p. 1), and for some, the ICR course was an experience of cognitive dissonance. For some students, the dissonance resolved into acquiring and owning new knowledge that changed their thinking and action. Others left their ICR course in a stage of anger and even hatred. Some of the negative emotions that students experienced in relation to the ICR experience included: outrage, disappointment, feeling silenced, and seeing no need for more reconciliation.

I report on the ICR experience as a "room divided," and placing the positive experience next to its negative counterpart, illustrates the stark juxtaposition of experiences (see Table 1). Illustrating the findings in this way reinforces the binary state that ICR proponents seek to erase.

Table 1: Student responses to their ICR.

Positive Responses	Negative Responses
Understanding and Respect	Outrage
Reconciliation	No need for more reconciliation
Support for the ICR	Disappointment in the ICR
Opened the door for conversations	Silenced

Understanding and respect.

Students of all ethnic backgrounds expressed appreciation for the understanding gained by taking an ICR course. Students enjoyed learning about their own culture and sharing knowledge about their culture with other students. Because people often "get the wrong idea" (student) about Indigenous culture, Indigenous students hoped that with the learning, "other's perceptions may change about my culture" (Indigenous student). Students expressed appreciation that this gap was being addressed:

I love learning about First Nations people, my people. Any knowledge is worth the time. (Indigenous student)

I am an international student and have not learned much about the history of Canada. With the Métis history course, I learned how Manitoba was formed and then how it was taken and the history hidden and retold. It showed me how words can be twisted to fit whatever outcome you might

want and that a person should be careful when reading because it might not be the full story. (International student)

For many non-Indigenous students, taking the ICR course was an eye-opening experience. They learned things for the first time and with an open learning attitude:

I think one of the most eye-opening was, you know, when you're taught it in school you always think we were the first ones here when in fact we weren't; you know, the Europeans. I didn't realize there was over eight million Indigenous people in North America when Columbus landed the boat. So, it was really quite an eye opener, you know, and being an older student, I had no knowledge. (Settler student)

Taking the ICR course helped students gain respect for Indigenous knowledge and that there are many ways of knowing and expressing knowledge. Students realized that there are many viewpoints of the world and that the European way is not the only perspective. Respecting each other and different worldviews were essential to learning with and from each other. A settler student explained:

When I received an essay back, it was pointed out in my feedback that I had provided context for the matter and addressed it from a Euro-centric viewpoint. It was true, and I hadn't thought of it that way. I appreciated the feedback and the opportunity to consider how I could have written it differently.

By taking an ICR course, students also learned to be careful of stereotypes: "The ICR course has taught me to be careful of stereotypes. Learn the history and the people before making general assumptions or agreeing with others on careless and uneducated thoughts and comments" (Settler student). An International student said: "we are on treaty land, and we should be respectful of that."

Outrage

Some students entered the ICR discussion with antagonistic emotions. Students indicated that they felt it was a waste of time and money and did not appreciate being forced to take a class they did not want.

My most vivid memory was dealing with the outrage leading up to it. On three occasions I saw non-aboriginal students arguing to aboriginal people nearby about how the requirement was 'stupid' and 'a waste of time.' On the first day, the people in my class seemed very angry that they had to take the course. I remember the room feeling very divided. I felt uncomfortable for the aboriginal students. (Indigenous student)

Some students expressed resentment about feeling forced to take a class they did not choose to take. "Forced" was a word that came up in many of the negative student responses. Because they felt forced, they went into the course with a negative attitude, which made it difficult for them to learn. They did not appreciate having to pay for the class that they thought was unnecessary. They felt it was unnecessary because they had already learned the material or had no interest in learning it. Although it is important that students acquire a certain knowledge base about Indigenous history that impacts current practice, the goal of the ICR was not forcing knowledge.

For some students, taking an ICR course came with extreme negative emotions:

"It was a horror show of confusion and incomplete information" (Settler student).

"I thought it was stupid going in and still thought so after I was done" (Indigenous student).

"The whole course sucked" (International student).

"Blame white people for everything" (Settler student).

"What I now feel is that we should have assimilated the Indigenous peoples by force" (Settler student).

"It WAS indigenous land. But not anymore. This land belongs to Canada and its rightful citizens" (Settler student).

Reconciliation.

In recent years in Canada, reconciliation has been a much-discussed topic. Vivian Ketchum (2017), an Indigenous woman from Wauzhushik Onigum Nation, said: “Reconciliation is an ugly word.” She continued to explain that many lofty words have been said and discussed, and much money spent to try to understand what reconciliation is, without any action coming of it. Sometimes reconciliation starts with an acknowledgement of past wrongs and a willingness to listen.

In this research, I acknowledge that we are once again talking and discussing reconciliation, with the humble hope that we learn how to move into action. Taking an ICR gave students the opportunity to think about reconciliation in a concerted way. They realized that we all have much to learn about reconciliation, that reconciliation and Indigenization are a complicated process, but students were willing to engage, think about it, and take action where necessary. An Indigenous student defined reconciliation as:

recognising that there are unforgiveable histories that have become intertwined through direct action, and now direct action is required by an oppressive party, by a colonial party, to find out what their place is in solving the problems that can be solved and in encouraging healing in areas where there is, potentially, unhealable damage.

About the ICR, an International student said:

It helped me understand that reconciliation is something we all must work at. It is a constant and living process. There are many ways to get there and we all can have a hand in it. While it did help me see the big picture it showed me how I can do things day to day to help.

No need for more reconciliation.

Evidence of the long and arduous process ahead, foreseen by some students, is exemplified by the following student quotes. Some students felt that taking an ICR course was “a complete waste of time and money,” and that reconciliation is not necessary.

A student that did not provide ethnic identity indicated:

I thought myself liberal before taking the course. But when I was shown what actually happened, I realized we are only prolonging the inevitable. We need to cut the b...s... And force them to adapt to modern way of life. They will die out in a couple hundred years if we don't. And I don't want people to keep dying and living a shitty life on the reserves. That's not fair to them.

An Indigenous student indicated: “Enough reconciliation has taken place.” A statement like this could mean two things: there is nothing more that needs to be done, or enough talking has happened and it is time for action.

Support for the ICR.

Both settler and Indigenous students supported the ICR and recognized that they had a role to play in reconciliation and that implementing the ICR is a good step forward in education and reconciliation. Many indicated that it was a “wonderful idea.” All degree programs have requirements and prerequisites that are associated with cost and time. Since students are required to take a humanities course, the ICR course fulfills more than just one requirement, which some students acknowledged. Passages like the following evidence support for the ICR:

I think that the ICR was a great decision. I think it's extremely important that everyone is aware of Indigenous life in the past, present, and future. (Indigenous student)

I think it's a wonderful idea. As a white settler living in Treaty 1 territory, I know far too little about the context of this area and the Indigenous peoples of Turtle Island. (Settler student)

Many students agreed that the ICR should definitely be mandatory because there are still many issues to address regarding Indigenous peoples of Canada. An Indigenous student said: “I would say it exceeded my expectations and became one of the best classes I've taken in University.”

Disappointment in the ICR.

Many students wanted to interact with the material and with their professor and were disappointed when their expectations were not met either because the interaction was uncomfortable or did not happen at all. An Indigenous student said:

When we got our syllabus for the course, [they] had written that we were going to have a ceremony with an elder which I immediately – like this is amazing, that's awesome. ...Never. So there was no interaction. It was honestly just like [they] talked about it, we just watched these... videos, we went home and that was the course...that definitely was not what I wanted to do.

An International student explained:

I just wish we'd had more class discussions; I mean, I understand it's a big class, so that's kind of complicated. Even then, I wish [they would have] had more time to talk after class, because we watched videos – [they] read off a PowerPoint – I just wish there was more interaction.



Aboriginal Student Services Center

ICR opened the door for conversations.

The ICR opened the opportunity for conversations that students wanted to have, but did not have the venue or vocabulary to know how to go about engaging in dialogue. The learning in ICR courses went much further than just classroom and book learning. Students talked about having conversations outside of classes about what they learned. Those conversations took place at home, over drinks in the bar, or in the hallway. Active learning was going on in many places.

An Indigenous student said that taking the ICR course gave him the vocabulary to talk with his grandpa about his culture:

and that was something that we were, kind of, missing. Like, we knew we were Métis and like, we went to some events, but we lacked the vocabulary to talk about, like the complexities of the politics of our history and it, kind of ... it's something where now he's using that vocabulary. So, on a level, like a personal level, it really built this stronger connection to who I am and who my family seeing ourselves as who we are.

The ICR also gave non-Indigenous students the vocabulary to correct faulty perceptions:

When I'm out in the world it made me stand up. When people say things that are inappropriate I correct them. If you can learn racism you can unlearn it. (Settler student).

Most students talked about the professor as playing a pivotal role in making the ICR class a good or bad experience. Students went into the class with a range and mixture of emotions including hesitant, dreading the course, looking forward to, and not knowing what to expect. Students expressed appreciation for the welcoming environment that was created in ICR courses. They appreciated it when professors were competent at relaying information, able to manage classroom dynamics adeptly, and sensitive to students who may experience discomfort in participating in unfamiliar ceremonies or exercises. Professors were responsible for either opening doors for engagements or silencing.

Silenced

Some students felt discomfort when they felt their voice was not heard. Some felt that their professors were biased and not open to hearing views that did not fit with their worldview. One student explained: “The group discussions were terrible because I felt I couldn’t have my opinion without being bashed. Maybe the teachers shouldn’t be biased and open up to non-Indigenous opinions without making students feel bad. Offer explanations to those opinions” (Settler student).

Tension was palpable in student comments. About the opinions that settler students may want to express in class and sometimes did, an Indigenous student expressed annoyance about questions that she thought were ignorant:

And I think it’s really annoying to think that profs are okay with allowing these ignorant comments to be made, because the whole point of the course is to educate them. And if someone openly says an ignorant comment about an Indigenous person, how come you're not going to address it? It’s really been frustrating, because I love the traditional lifestyle. I always felt that I was attacked in courses (Indigenous student).

Some students expressed criticism of the classroom environment, teaching methods, and strategies. They talked about teachers not being prepared to teach the course, about bad teaching, discomfort in knowing how to offer opinions, feeling like not all contributions were welcome, and disappointed when professors did not allow time or space for interactions.

Some students indicated that although they may have good intentions, professors were not prepared to work with sensitive material that needed to be handled carefully. Several students suggested that the way the content was presented was through a colonial lens, which caused deep frustration. They noticed that professors did not have the skills to manage classroom dynamics that sometimes became tense. Even the lack of enthusiasm or care for the content caused frustration.

And so I think the ways the profs are teaching, is very unprepared, because I feel like they're doing it with good intentions, but in the way they're presenting, the information is really kind of just thrown out. (Indigenous student).

It was awful. If you're going to make a class required, PLEASE assign good profs. Literally none were good. All bad teaching. (Settler student).

But I did notice that there was like a lot of backlash cattiness in those group discussions. And I didn’t see the – the prof wouldn’t really address it, they just kind of like brushed it off, and it really daunted me. (International student).

Faculty and staff ICR experience

Most students and professors seemed surprised that the ICR experience went as smoothly as it did. Students had expected the ICR class to be more painful and professors expected more backlash. In conversations with professors, I heard many positive perceptions of students and their engagement. Findings revealed that the faculty and staff experience came with unexpected surprises as well as challenges (see Table 2).

Table 2: Faculty and staff responses to their ICR.

Surprises	Challenges
Anticipated backlash an exception	Pressure on Indigenous students
Engaged students	Tension in the classroom
Relationship building	Negative student evaluations

Anticipated backlash an exception

The surprises that faculty and staff indicated were that the anticipated backlash was an exception, students demonstrated exceptional engagement in the discussions, and were keen on forging relationships. Some professors anticipated a hostile response from students, but were pleasantly surprised by students that came with a learning attitude.

Well, I wondered if there was going to be some backlash particularly from students in dominant social locations, white students in particular, and I've been happy to see that, for the most part, people are just super-engaged, you know, and they want to learn and they don't want to repeat the mistakes of the past. (Indigenous professor).

My first impression is that there is far less pushback than expected. (Settler professor)

Some professors took the opportunity to discuss the ICR at the beginning of their course by opening the floor for an open and honest dialogue. Students being able to feel free to say that taking the course was not fair, gave professors the opportunity to field questions and comments openly rather than students feeling like they needed to repress their honest emotions about the topic and the requirement. This openness led to positive change and an openness to be a part of the class with an open mind.

Engaged students

Not only was there less backlash than professors expected, they also found that students were more engaged than they anticipated. Professors expressed that students seemed genuinely interested in learning and came prepared to discuss contemporary issues.

So the second and third-year students are in there because they want to be and that is awesome (Indigenous professor).

As much as students – particularly settler students – might not have a background in Indigenous politics, they are paying attention to what's going on in the media and just what's going on in general, so they are much more informed and aware than I expected them to be when they came into class. (Settler professor).

Relationships

Faculty and staff talked about the importance of relationships. A staff member said: “I don't think that there's an unwillingness to engage with tough topics; I think it's a respectful approach that places the importance of relationship first in these conversations.”

Faculty talked about the original relationship between Indigenous peoples and settlers. The Two Row Wampum Belt was symbolic of the original agreement in 1613 in between some Indigenous and European peoples on Turtle Island. It was a commitment to mutual friendship, peace between nations, and living together as brothers and sisters (Venables, 2009). That original relationship was to last forever “as long as the grass is green, as long as the water flows downhill, and as long as the sun rises in the east and sets in the west” (Powless, 1994, p. 21). A settler professor said:

Whenever we're talking about contemporary issues, I encourage them [students] to shed what you've learned over time of Indigenous people being subordinate to Canada, and remember that original relationship. And we talk about two-row wampum and how do you think things should be today if we were to keep that original relationship intact?



(Two Row Wampum Belt, 2017)

Faculty talked about the interconnectedness of people. If we indeed are all related, then we all share the responsibility to watch out for each other and work for the good of the whole community. The goal of the ICR was to teach Canadians about:

the true history of this country, about contemporary realities, and that we're all in this together, so we all have a part to play. The grand goal is to impart knowledge as well as ways of knowing that go beyond the western that serve as a corrective for the knowledge that's been disseminated for hundreds of years. So when you do that, you hopefully help Canadians of all backgrounds and even temporary visitors see themselves as relations, so a lot of indigenous cultures use a phrase that is or sounds like we are all relations; it's not a metaphor, it's not symbolic, it means we are literally all relations (Indigenous professor).

The importance of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships, and educating the general Canadian public about Indigenous realities has a long history including intertribal and colonial treaties, the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, and recently the TRC. The ICR was important in establishing ally relationships and extended beyond just classroom material. Events like the Weweni Indigenous Scholars Speakers Series foregrounded the important work being done and provided opportunities for networking and for:

people from different backgrounds to meet each other – learn about the cool work that we're all doing and build relationships because I think that's a key in indigenization, a key in understanding the world from an indigenous perspective, its relationships. We are all – like we are all related in some way; we're all connected and it's our responsibility to figure out how are we related and therefore what are our mutual obligations, our responsibilities? (Indigenous professor).

Not only were relationships within the classroom and University community important but also beyond the University walls to establish relationships with the wider community:

With the ICR, Indigenization, I mean we're educating and training the public that lives around us right, so I think that there will be positive impact. In the meantime, I think it would be really beneficial to create more relationships between academia and community. Like Indigenous community does amazing stuff, like grassroots community stuff, the North End is just – it's amazing in terms of community and collaboration. (Indigenous professor).

Participants talked about relationships leading to building bridges: “So if we can build bridges, you know with the University and talk with them, collaborate, and increase those kinds of relationships, I think that would also help” (Indigenous professor).

Pressure on Indigenous students

The challenges that faculty and staff talked about pertained to the pressure that they felt Indigenous students were exposed to as token authority, the tension in the classrooms, and negative student evaluations. Non-Indigenous professors expressed gratitude for the expertise and perspective that Indigenous students brought to the classroom, but were cognizant that this could also make students feel uncomfortable. A settler professor claimed:

So as a non-Indigenous instructor, I can't speak about it first hand, and so I think students would like to hear that first hand and then they turn to Indigenous students to try to get those stories and that's – they don't always have them, it's not their responsibility to teach, you know, to share them.

Non-Indigenous students and professors leaning on Indigenous students for real-life examples was problematic because it assumed that all Indigenous peoples' experiences are the same. It could put Indigenous students in a bad position in that they felt that they had to explain, or they had to teach the class in some ways.

Tension in the classroom

A challenge that professors did not anticipate was the tension in classrooms. Some professors taught classes that previously were populated by predominantly Indigenous students, but with the new ICR, non-Indigenous students now joined these classes. Previously the classes were safe spaces where Indigenous students could learn about their culture and where their identity was celebrated and

affirmed. The reaction of non-Indigenous students to an Indigenous centered classroom was very different:

“It was, in some cases very negative, because this is the first space they’d ever encountered where the story wasn’t all about them and it was hard; it was very difficult actually. They would become very defensive” (Indigenous professor).

Learning about colonialism and understanding history for Indigenous students was a very different process. For non-Indigenous students the history of colonialism felt like a personal attack, even when it was not meant to be. That was something professors had to adjust to:

their [students’] reaction was different, very defensive, insecure, awkward, threatening and so what would normally have been a classroom situation of empowerment, really wasn’t that same way anymore and it was not the same experience for Indigenous students. And also tension within groups, right? So yeah, you’re trying to kind of balance these sort of two sides. It was a bit more difficult in that situation. (Indigenous professor).

Added to the tension of different reactions to course content was the fear that students would resent that the course was required:

“I’m not sure how the University really could mediate that more. I think with time that students will just accept it, like you have to take a science credit, you have to take your Indigenous course requirement” (Indigenous professor). Faculty and staff recognized that “Indigenization requires tough conversations and demands that people not turn away from these conversations anymore, but it also recognizes that for many people these conversations can and will be traumatic” (staff).

Negative student evaluations

Professors indicated that because the course was required, students would go into the course with negative perceptions and therefore evaluate the professor negatively:

Biggest challenge I faced is because of the type of course it is and it’s mandatory. My evaluations per se will go down dramatically compared to a non-mandatory course. There’s a lot of students that are actually very receptive to Indigenous issues. There’s not all resistance, but the way the course evaluations are set up, if you have one or two who are resistant, that reflects very heavily on your own course evaluations. (Indigenous professor).

Another Indigenous professor agreed:

We’ll see what the evaluations are. When these kinds of things are introduced there’s typically a backlash where professors get very, very poor teaching evaluations as a reaction to students feeling forced to do something and sometimes those can come across very racial as well. (Indigenous professor).

Actions recommended by participants

As part of the research, participants were asked for suggestions for how they thought the ICR experience could be improved. The following recommendations have been developed from reflections based on the consultation with a substantial, but still limited number of constituents, not as conclusive recommendations emanating from a system-wide program evaluation.

Learning languages

TRC Action 16 states: “We call upon post-secondary institutions to create University and college degree and diploma programs in Aboriginal languages” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 2). Action 10.iv also states: “Protecting the right to Aboriginal languages, including the teaching of Aboriginal languages as credit courses” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015, p. 2). Understanding that language is key to culture, participants talked about the importance of Indigenous language instruction.

Indigenous leadership

Many students recommended an increase in Indigenous leadership. They suggested that an Indigenous professor would have given them a more first-hand experience. Having Indigenous professors was very important to students, which they saw as part of reconciliation, but students were quick to add that using Indigenous pedagogy was just as important as being able to speak from personal experience. Indigenous hires in all positions at the University would be an active way to illustrate reconciliation: not only more tenured professors, but staff positions such as librarians, administrators, food service, and security.

Relationships

Participants expressed a strong desire for relationships. Content covered in classes was impetus for conversations, and there was an eagerness to have conversations in informal settings, to learn from each other, and to establish friendships in keeping with the understanding that “we are all relations”. Like the workshops for ICR professors, workshops could be organized for students, staff, and mixed faculty, staff, and students, where everyone would be welcome to engage in dialogue.

Pedagogy

Professors talked about a project-based approach in their pedagogy, where students were given the opportunity to develop their own creativity by doing a project based on a topic instead of writing a 10-page essay about it. When students worked in groups or clans, professors encouraged students to bring their strengths to the projects.

Inviting Elders into the class was beneficial in teaching students understanding and respect. Students wanted to hear more personal stories, experiences that happened to individuals. Storytelling and humour was an effective pedagogical strategy. Students desired more hands-on learning:

“Sitting in desks in rows, listening to a single person lecture from a textbook while scribbling down notes is not an appropriate way to be learning about ceremony, traditional medicines, or creation stories” (Settler student). Students suggested that art and oral teachings would be helpful pedagogical aids, “instead of just another textbook shoved in my hand. Makes everything feel so dull and painful” (International student).



Instead of the traditional hierarchical approach to teaching, professors encouraged everyone to be open to learning from each other, which also included the teacher learning from students, even though sometimes the teacher was standing at the front of the room. The visual form of a nonhierarchical learning environment was a circle instead of desks in rows. One professor succinctly explained the rationale for this structure:

We're all learning together. Everybody is on a learning journey. Everybody has specific gifts and challenges. They may be different from the person sitting next to you, and to just recognize and be patient with each other because we don't know what the next person is dealing with (Indigenous professor).

Participants talked about the necessity for support services for students, faculty, and staff that could experience trauma as a result of studying traumatic history. Counselling services could be readily available for students, faculty or staff that were triggered or were hurt by insensitive or outright racist comments made in class.

Training for faculty

Students expressed the need for special preparation and training for educators to know how to deal with issues concerning racism. Since Indigenous education can open wounds and students can be triggered, faculty and staff need to be prepared in knowing how to anticipate and deal with sensitive and highly emotional situations.



Support services

Conclusion

Using multimodal research methods, this study examined student, faculty, and staff experience with the ICR in its initial implementation in the 2016/17 academic year. Findings revealed that although students and instructors had suggestions for how to improve course content, development, delivery, and support, most student participants expanded their learning in a neutral or good and empathetic way that indicated their increased awareness and understanding of Indigenous issues. They appreciated the open conversations and the acquisition of new vocabulary to be able to participate in the dialogue in a respectful way. They applauded the University for the ICR initiative and wished they could have learned these things a long time ago.

Of the student participants, that had negative experiences, some were not opposed to the idea of an ICR, but their particular class did not meet their expectations. Others may have experienced cognitive dissonance that did not resolve in a positive learning experience. Reasons for the less than desirable experience was the sense that students felt forced to take a class they did not want or see as necessary. Some thought reconciliation was a waste of time and assimilation should continue to be forced upon Indigenous peoples, evidence for the necessity of an ICR course. Besides the course content, professor pedagogy was criticized. Students felt that large classes limited discussions and interaction. These students felt professors were biased and not open to hearing a different point of view.

Professors expressed concern about a potential backlash from students especially in “dominant locations,” but findings showed a better than expected result. They were pleasantly surprised by enthusiastic student engagement. Disengaged antagonistic students caused concern and professors expressed a gap in knowing how to handle tension in the classroom. Professors expressed gratitude for the ally relationships that were being forged with colleagues. Although most Indigenous professors appreciated sharing the ICR workload with non-Indigenous allies, many students revealed a preference for Indigenous professors for the ICR course, though they also noted that overall good pedagogy was more important.

Challenges that faculty, staff, and students indicated were the pressure on Indigenous students to take on the role of token authority on the Indigenous experience, how to sensitively support students and staff when talking about a traumatic history that triggered profound grief for some and complete indifference or anger for others, and how to manage contentious discussions in class when there was evidence of overt or covert antagonism, racism, and tension. There was consensus that racism exists and that education and relationships are key to changing stereotypes. The ICR was seen as a positive step towards reconciliation but there was much work that still needed to be done. Necessary components to moving forward in a good way included providing students with more information and intent about the ICR, more support services, pedagogical training, and debrief mechanisms for all involved.

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