

Post-Secondary Education in the Inner-City: Breaking barriers and building bridges in a divided city

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Abstract

The Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies (UICS) is a department in the faculty of Arts at the University of Winnipeg in Manitoba, Canada. The Department is located outside of the main campus in one of Canada's poorest neighbourhoods. UICS is intentionally located here to offer access to postsecondary education to people who might not otherwise attend university. Our department aims to encourage people who have come to believe that university is 'not for them'. It also serves to bring students from other areas of the city into the neighbourhood to begin to dispel long held misconceptions about the North End. We continue to develop our critical, place-based model in the spirit of putting 'reconciliation into action'. As described by Senator Murray Sinclair, the former Chair of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, it is "'up to society' to step up and take the actions that are needed." (CBC 2017). At UICS, we are committed to 'stepping up' by creating opportunities for learning through honest dialogue, and challenging systemic divides in our community.

Keywords: Postsecondary education; Winnipeg; honest dialogue; Indigenous students.

The Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies: Critical place-based learning in Winnipeg's North End

Like many urban centres, the City of Winnipeg continues to deal with deep racial and class divides. Winnipeg's North End has historically been home to a high number of working-class immigrants, refugees, and low-income Indigenous families who have migrated from First Nations. Some settle in the North End because it is affordable. Others choose the North End because they have family and friends there. While the North End has long suffered from the stereotypical narrative of being a dangerous and undesirable place to live—a location of last resort—many who live in the North End feel safe and welcome there.

In addition to the geographic and class divide, Winnipeg is most notably divided between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Winnipeg has the highest Indigenous population of any city in Canada and the number is growing. Canada's most recent census (2016) shows 92,810 (12.2 percent) of Winnipeg's population self-identified as Indigenous (First Nations, Métis and Inuit), increasing from 11.13 percent in 2011. A high percentage of people in the North End identify as Indigenous. Forty percent of people in the William Whyte neighbourhood in North Point Douglas community (Figure 1) where UICS is located identify as Indigenous, compared with 12 percent in all of Winnipeg.

It is also the case that North End neighbourhoods in the inner-city measure poorly on a number of indicators. In the William Whyte neighbourhood upwards of 38 percent of individuals live in poverty (LICO-AT) compared with 13.2 percent in all of Winnipeg (Winnipeg Neighbourhood Profiles). The poverty rate is highest in neighbourhoods like William Whyte which are located closest to the inner-city boundaries.

It is commonly known that there is a strong correlation between education and poverty. In Winnipeg, the proportion of inner-city adults with less than a high school diploma is double the proportion in the non-inner city (MPHM 2018). In William Whyte, more than 40 percent of people over the age of 15 report have no certificate, degree or diploma, compared with 17 percent of individuals in all of Winnipeg (Winnipeg Neighbourhood Profiles). Here households are twice as

likely to experience overcrowding compared to non-inner-city households (MPHM 2018). This is important because research shows that access to safe, adequate and stable housing is important to student success (Cunningham & MacDonald 2012).



Figure 1: City of Winnipeg communities.
(Map accessed <https://www.gov.mb.ca/fs/misc/loc/print,winnipeg.html>).

There is also a high number of inner-city children in the care of Child and Family Services (CFS), 90 percent of whom are Indigenous. This has implications for education outcomes. According to the Child and Family Service Division in the Province of Manitoba, approximately 500 youth exit CFS annually without essential life skills. They are largely unprepared to live independently as adults. Children who grow up in foster care are less likely to graduate from high school and have a greater likelihood of suffering from mental illness, chronic unemployment, homelessness, and incarceration (MPHM 2018). All of the indicators outlined above have implications for education outcomes and the perpetuation of poverty and social exclusion. In Winnipeg, Indigenous people are more likely to measure poorly on many of these indicators.

Although there is a growing population identifying as visible minority (38 percent in 2016), North End Neighbourhoods have largely become Indigenous spaces. Fully 40 percent of people in William Whyte identified as Indigenous in 2016. This is relevant to our understanding of the colonial context of education in Canada. We know that Indigenous children are not doing as well in school compared to other Manitoba children and that education attainment for Indigenous people continues to compare poorly with non-Indigenous people (Chartier, Brownell et al 2020).

We also know that much of the blame can be attributed to the intergenerational trauma resulting from residential school policy. Under the residential school policy (1880s-1990s) children were taken from their parents, educated in a new religion and new language. As described by the TRC (2015), Canada's residential school policy became a central component of the federal government

policy aligned with “cultural genocide” (TRC(a) 2015, 10). The objective was that students would be “absorbed into the body politic” eventually there “would be no Indians, no reserves and no treaty obligations” (TRC(a) 2015,10).

The residential schools failed to achieve their intended goals, but they have left a legacy of despair. They were deeply destructive for Indigenous children, families, and communities. The schools were poorly built, poorly funded, and poorly maintained. Death rates were high, punishment harsh, education inadequate, and the risk of sexual abuse was significant. A notable legacy of the schools is a distrust in education as the proverbial “ticket out of poverty”.

This dynamic has led many Indigenous people to leave education at an early age, sometimes returning later as adults. Through the work of the TRC we have learned a great deal about the impact of residential schools. The TRC report includes a number of calls to action that if implemented would begin to redress the damage done, but there is a long way yet to go. Western approaches continue to dominate university curriculum and pedagogical approaches even though the impact of colonialism is fully acknowledged (Gala and Holmes 2020).

The Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies continues to develop course content and a pedagogical approach with an understanding of the devastating effects of colonial policies and programs, including residential schools. Inspired by research demonstrating the benefits of place-based learning, the University of Winnipeg relocated the Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies to the North End. The department joined other postsecondary education programs, crossing the notorious railyards that have long been symbolic of the north-south divide. Initially located in a small basement space on Selkirk Avenue, in 2017 UICS relocated down the street to its new home at Merchants Corner. Once a hotel, bar and beer vendor, Merchants Hotel was reclaimed and repurposed into an intergenerational education facility. The Department of UICS is an anchor tenant along with the community-based Community Education Development Association and its Pathways to Education program. A program provides enhanced supports for youth struggling to complete high school.

This re-location has been significant for a number of reasons. It aligns with research showing that multiple-barriered, racialized and Indigenous students who have struggled to succeed through the typical post-secondary trajectory do far better in small, neighbourhood settings (MacKinnon 2015, Silver 2013). Locating on Selkirk Avenue was also an important gesture to people living in a community that has long been ostracized and excluded. It demonstrated that the University of Winnipeg believed in the importance of bringing education to them. That they matter and that the university welcomes them.

Reconciliation, decolonization and critical place-based pedagogy

The continued oppression of Indigenous people in Canada, and in the spatialized marginalized inner-city neighbourhoods in Winnipeg, calls for a localized critical pedagogy that aims to facilitate processes and create safe spaces for students to make sense of their realities within their ‘specific historical, political and social context’ (Smith 1999, 186). Although the University of Winnipeg made clear its mandate to ‘indigenize’ in 2015, the Department of UICS has been on this path since relocating to the North End in 2011. We have developed, and continue to refine, a pedagogical framework that melds decolonizing content with critical-placed based pedagogies. Our experience has shown that bringing critical pedagogies into inner city, colonized spaces can have a transformative impact on the lives of students from all walks of life.

Place-based pedagogy in our context is an approach to education that centres learning about inner-city issues in the neighbourhoods where issues are experienced. It offers a small, safe, encouraging space for Indigenous and other students who have been excluded, to shed their internal doubts, heal from trauma, explore what is possible, build confidence and embrace the idea that acquiring a university degree is achievable. We want our students to know – to believe – that university is “for them” too.

Our approach is consistent with the theoretical foundations of social justice education, rooted in an understanding of systemic oppression (Bell 2016, Freire 2006). We have learned through research and practice that for many Indigenous students and others who have been pushed to the margins, pedagogies that challenge Eurocentric narratives, privilege Indigenous knowledge and emphasize the ‘imperative for righting the wrongs of colonial domination, and an ethical stance in relation to social justice for those peoples enslaved and disempowered by persistent forms of coloniality’ (Zembylas 2019, 404) are essential. Although we refer to these features as central elements of decolonizing pedagogy, we do so with an understanding that decolonization and reconciliation will not be achieved through pedagogy alone. Nonetheless, we have learned in our inner-city context that integrating these features can be transformative for students who have internalized the colonial narrative that they are inferior (Memmi 1965). Our approach also aligns with social justice education approaches that ‘create learning communities where members share and learn from teacher’s experiences, reflect on their own and others’ experiences to make sense of larger structural systems of advantage and disadvantage and create new meanings for themselves’ (Adams 2016, 29).

Faculty and staff in the Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies believe strongly in the place-based approach that continues to evolve. We have learned a few important lessons since relocating to Selkirk Avenue in 2011. Although the initial purpose of locating in the North End was to make university accessible to a neighbourhood with all of the challenges associated with poverty and systemic racism, something more profound is happening here. University of Winnipeg students from the southside of the city are coming to the North End to study with us. These students are interested in learning more about urban and inner-city issues from the perspective of those with lived experience. We have learned that bringing Indigenous and non-Indigenous students from various backgrounds to study in an Indigenous space with a high number of Indigenous students, in small classrooms and with instructors who create a safe space for dialogue, can have a profound impact in the spirit of reconciliation.

Reconciliation begins with education

Understandably, the legacy of residential school policy has led many of the Indigenous residents in the neighbourhood to distrust mainstream education. Our research informed pedagogical approach begins with this understanding. Although we are not an Indigenous studies department, in all of our courses we acknowledge the “truth” about colonial policies and the centrality of reconciliation in correcting past and present harms. We integrate both Western methods and Indigenous ways of knowing, being and learning; an approach that our students embrace. In this regard, UICS was ahead of the curve, learning to adopt a process of indigenization and reconciliation before its importance was highlighted in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission reports (Fiola & MacKinnon 2018, TRC 2015). We agree with TRC Chair, Justice Murry Sinclair, that “education is the key to reconciliation” (Macleans 2016). That it is about:

“atonement. It's about making amends. It's about apology. It's about recognizing responsibility. It's about accounting for what has gone on. But ultimately, it's about commitment to maintaining that mutually respectful relationship throughout, recognizing that, even when you establish it, there will be challenges to it.” (Sinclair 2017).

We have learned that the process of reconciliation can be uncomfortable, and we need to accept and work through that discomfort together. It challenges non-Indigenous students to learn how they continue to benefit from the historical oppression of others. In the urban context, reconciliation can begin with non-Indigenous people stepping out of their comfort zones to learn about colonization and its related effects in spaces where oppression is most intense. This is what many of the students who study with us at Merchants Corner are doing.

The students who reside outside of the North End are often tentative when they initially come to Merchants Corner. This is not particularly surprising. Many of these students have lived their entire lives in Winnipeg yet have never visited the North End. Many learned from an early age to fear the North End. These students who are typically white and many of them tell us that their parents are not particularly keen on their taking courses on Selkirk Avenue because they fear for their safety.

Although they desire to learn the truth about our divided city, they come with preconceived ideas about the North End that are often racist. Hesitant at first, they begin to challenge these beliefs, mainly because of what they learn from their peers but also from course content that explores the root causes of poverty. They learn from their classmates who have lived in poverty in the inner city, the impact that poverty has had on their lives. They learn from their Indigenous peers who know first hand of the damage caused by intergenerational trauma of colonization and systemic racism, including that which gave us residential schools and the child welfare “sixties scoop” (Johnston 1983; TRC 2015). It forces privileged white students to examine how the intersections of their experiences shape the way they view and experience the world. They learn to critically reflect on how well-intended charitable actions can serve to perpetuate injustice and systemic oppression. They learn that ‘reconciliation’ requires non-Indigenous people to advocate for necessary systemic changes. Engaging in critical place-based learning provides students with tools to more fully understand systemic racism, injustice, inequality and oppression by bringing them outside of the ivory tower into real-world sites of oppression, in real time. It provides students from diverse backgrounds an opportunity to learn about, from, with, and in the community, and to be actively engaged in progressive social change as allies.

We have learned that meaningful dialogue through place-based learning with those who we perceive as ‘different’ can be a powerful and transformative experience. Take the example of Jim and Joe (not their real names). Jim is an Indigenous male who was enrolled in my Introduction to Urban and Inner-City Studies course in 2016. On the first day of class he sat beside Joe, a white male from the southside of the City. Jim and Joe were similar in age, early to mid 20s, and were likely drawn to sit together because they were the only two males in a class of 25 students.

As we typically do on the first day of class, we went around the circle (our classrooms are set up with tables and chairs organized in a circle) with students introducing themselves and sharing with their classmates a few words on why they chose the course. Jim was forthcoming in sharing that he was on probation for a crime that he had committed. He was pursuing his education hoping to take a different path. Joe squirmed a bit as Jim spoke. When it was his turn to speak, he shared that he was a criminal justice student and interested in applying to be a police officer. He took the course because he thought it would be interesting to learn more about the inner-city given the high level of crime in the area. The class chuckled a bit at the irony of Jim and Joe sitting next to each other. But we respectfully moved on, continuing with our introductions. Jim and Joe continued to sit beside each other throughout the term. They would chat a bit before and after class and then went their separate ways. On the last day of class, we did a final round of sharing, this time each sharing something we learned over the term.

When we came to Jim and Joe, each shared about their experience sitting beside each other throughout the term. They acknowledged how very different their lives had been — each from very different backgrounds and experiences. They said they appreciated having sat next to each other over the term and engaging with someone that they would not have typically been exposed to. They noted that being in a small non-judgmental class environment, where neither wielded power over the other, made this possible. Joe in particular acknowledged the importance of better understanding the context of Jim’s experience as he pursued his interest in policing and the power that came with that role.

It was a transformational day for all of us in the classroom. I don’t know what happened after that day. I expect that Jim and Joe went their separate ways and very likely never spoke again. I don’t really know because I didn’t see either of them again. I only know that each were exposed, for 3 hours a week over 3 months to someone they likely would not otherwise have spoken with and that it had an impact on them.

A similar experience was shared by a student in a written reflection of her experience in that same course. She wrote:

In September, when I first started Introduction to Urban and Inner -City studies, I was very scared. I walked in not knowing what to expect. I came into the class, sat down and looked around. I noticed that it was a mixed class—half Aboriginal and half white. This surprised me

because I expected everyone in class would be Aboriginal given the fact that it is located on Selkirk Avenue. I was very intimidated...*the Professor started the class and on that first day everyone was very quiet. She gave us a program outline. The topics and words that were used in the first class were very unfamiliar to me. I felt overwhelmed. I did not know the definitions and meanings of most of the words and I felt like the white students in class would judge me and look down on me. I felt the white students would be so much smarter than I am and I would end up looking like a dumb Indian or Halfbreed.*

I spoke to the professor after class and she reassured me that most of the students were probably feeling the same way. I felt relieved and encouraged and was ready to give the class a chance and make a go of it.

As the weeks went by, we learned about gentrification in neighbourhoods and how it affects the individuals living in the communities. Many people end up getting pushed out of their neighbourhoods with nowhere to go. We learned about city planning and how much Winnipeg needs and spends to run the city. We learned about urban sprawl and had discussions on how it would be a better idea for the city to fix the old roads in the North End than to pay for new infrastructure in the suburbs. We watched the mayoral election and had discussions on what each candidate was promising and talked about whether they were actually the people they presented to be.

Learning about the 1919 Winnipeg general strike was also very interesting to learn about. It brought attention to the divide in the city at that time. Wealthier people lived in the south end of the city and the poor immigrant workers lived in the north end. The difference today is that it is Native people who are more likely to live in the North End.

We had many discussions in class. We learned to trust each other. Each one of us had our own views but respected each other, even though many of us would never have talked to each other on the street if we had not met in class. The professor made it a safe place and welcomed everyone's opinions. Now when I see my classmates at the main campus, it is funny because they will be standing with their friends when they see me, and they'll shout out "HI!" Then they "high five" me in the hall while their friends stand there looking at them with a confused look.

Overall, I learned a lot about the city of Winnipeg and had a great time in class (student reflection December 2014)

Another student, this one a middle-class white student from the south side of the city, shared this:

I'm grateful for having taken this class...Having an open class format was very powerful as everyone came with their own knowledge and experience and I learned a lot hearing what they had to say...It's been different from my past university experience in a really positive way.

I think just being on this campus [Merchants Corner] has taught me so much about relationships and the importance of connecting with people. I've formed personal relationships with some of my peers that have changed the way I see myself, and how I related to other people (student reflection December 2018)

An important part of learning is the revelation that there is much we don't know about what we think we know. For the following student, learning this was important.

I took this class because I thought I had a good amount of knowledge about the content that was going to be taught. I didn't know how off the mark I was going to be....this class has given me an in depth understanding on matters that should be discussed about this city. I learned to look at things from a different perspective ...I got to learn from others' life experiences (student reflection 2019).

The perspectives shared by the above students are typical of what we hear at Merchants Corner. Students tell us that the environment inspires them to explore their prejudices and to think hard about racism and oppression and what can be done – personally and structurally.

Pedagogy and Covid-19

I wrote this paper at the height of the Covid-19 pandemic, so it seems pertinent to reflect on the implications for our department and the students who study with us. Universities in Manitoba have shifted to online learning. Our department has adapted as best it can, offering our courses through alternative online formats. It's not an ideal way to learn at the best of times, but it is particularly counterintuitive to our pedagogical approach.

Some of our courses are impossible to teach online and we have had to cancel them. Instructors have responded by creating new courses more conducive to online formats and are doing their best to offer flexible options for students. The changes have been particularly challenging for our students with more complicated lives. We are surveying our students to better understand the impact on their learning, and we'll have more to say on this in the coming months. Our initial observation is that the more typical university student (middle class, younger students), are adapting fairly well. Older students, Indigenous students, newcomer students, single parents, those living in poverty with less-than-ideal housing and study space, are struggling more. Some have chosen to delay their education until they can return to the classroom setting. Some students continue to actively engage in the classroom discussions online, but others have become quiet. It's near impossible to create the same level of safe trusting environment on Zoom. It is far too easy to hide in the background. Easy to be invisible by disabling the video. Easy to look away.

As one white student from a rural community shared in class at the end of the term before the pandemic, sitting in a circle in the small Merchants Corner classroom with a diverse group of students "forced" him for the first time to focus his attention and really listen to his peers, even when it was uncomfortable to hear the painful truths of their experiences. Sitting in the circle required him to look into people's eyes rather than at their backs.

As many of our Indigenous friends and students tell us, "this is the power of the circle", which is central to our pedagogical approach. For now, we will continue to do what we must do to curtail the spread of the virus. But like the students who study with us at Merchants Corner, I look forward to the time when we can back to the "circle".



Students with instructor in the Introduction to Urban and Inner-City Studies class. 2019.

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About the Author

Dr. MacKinnon is Associate Professor, Chair of the Department of Urban and Inner-City studies, and Principal Investigator of the Manitoba Researcher Alliance (MRA), a community led research consortium. The MRA was recently awarded a 7-year partnership grant from the Social Science Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) for the “Solutions to Poverty: Challenges and Possibilities” project. Dr. MacKinnon has conducted research on social and economic issues for over 20 years with a focus on public policy, poverty and inequality. Dr. MacKinnon is proud to be the Chair of the Department of Urban and Inner-City Studies, situated in Merchants Corner in the heart of Winnipeg’s North End. She believes strongly in place-based pedagogical approach that privileges the voices and experiences of those who have been excluded from mainstream education. Dr. MacKinnon believes that bringing Indigenous and non-Indigenous people to learn together in the small, supportive space in Winnipeg’s North End is an important step in the truth and reconciliation process.