

Truth and Reconciliation in YOUR Classroom

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How to get started, and who can help

BY KATE FREEMAN, SHAWN MCDONALD AND LINDSAY MORCOM

THIS IS AN EXCITING TIME to be a teacher. Teachers have amazing potential to help make Truth and Reconciliation a reality, and to move the next generation forward in creating a fairer, more just, and more inclusive Canada. It's a big job, and one that many teachers approach with a bit of fear and more than a few questions.

The teachers in our schools want to do a great job. In addition, they often feel an overwhelming responsibility to right the wrongs of the past and inspire their students to seek equity and social justice. They recognize that infusing Indigenous histories, cultures and perspectives into educational curriculum is a way to contribute towards the goal of reconciliation by providing students with an opportunity to learn about the Indigenous people with whom they share the land, and on whose ancestral territories all Canadians currently reside. Unfortunately, these same teachers also know that they are being asked to inform students about an Indigenous people about whom they themselves may have learned little. As well,

many teachers have had little, if any, cultural sharing or first-hand experience with Indigenous people. It is not surprising then, that many teachers' feelings range from nervous and unprepared to woefully inadequate when asked to bring these topics into their classrooms.

Developing pedagogy for reconciliation

To get started, we would like to explore some fundamental approaches to fostering reconciliation in your classroom. It's very important that teachers realize that the education system has been used to rob Indigenous people of their languages, their cultures, and their communities through the residential school system. This is why teachers have a responsibility to work *with* Indigenous people, families, and communities, rather than continuing to work in a system that speaks *for* Indigenous people, families, and communities - that is, don't do *for*, do *with*. It is also vital to understand that doing nothing adds to the problem. When teachers do nothing, Indigenous children



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don't see themselves in their classrooms, and non-Indigenous children do not learn about this land's first - and continuing - inhabitants. Then, students implicitly learn that Indigenous people, knowledge, and perspectives are worth less, and they may continue to pass on the systemic injustices that have gotten us into this situation.

The challenge for teachers is that many don't know how, or where, to begin. There are more than 50 First Nations in Canada, in addition to the distinct Métis and Inuit groups. If teachers are required to be experts on all these groups before teaching their students, then the teaching and the learning will never happen. Fortunately, teaching is not about having all the answers and teachers are not being asked to be experts on all of Canada's Indigenous people.

However, the question then becomes: "How can teachers indigenize their classrooms *well*?" Many teachers are understandably afraid of teaching Indigenous material poorly, perpetuating stereotypes or overstepping their bounds and engaging in cultural appropriation. *Cultural appropriation* can take on many forms. It can be the adoption of elements of one culture into another without fully understanding or acknowledging their meaning. It can mean making use of sacred

objects, like headdresses at Hallowe'en for example, without learning about why they are sacred or important. It can mean presenting Indigenous peoples as caricatures or as existing only in the past. It can mean speaking on behalf of Indigenous people or taking on elements of Indigenous spirituality without getting permission from qualified Indigenous knowledge keepers. Basically, cultural appropriation is taking and using important cultural elements that do not belong to you without learning about them first. It is setting yourself up as an expert on a culture you are not a part of, or not respecting the living existence of Indigenous people, the sophistication of Indigenous knowledge and spirituality, or the capability of Indigenous experts, Elders, and knowledge keepers.

Practically, there are steps you can take to avoid cultural appropriation but still incorporate Indigenous content in your classroom.

- Never dress, act or do activities that reduce a group into a caricature or stereotype. If it's not accurate and respectful, it's not OK.
- Don't misuse anything of religious significance or cultural meaning, even if you don't understand exactly why. If you're not sure if something is sacred, it is important to ask or do your research.

- Don't *practice* culture in your classroom, *teach about* culture in your classroom.
- Never appropriate someone else's culture as your own - not even as a demonstration for students.
- Ask yourself: "If I were a member of the group in question, could I be offended?" Take history into account, and show empathy.

The task may seem daunting, but teachers across the country are reading the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's "calls to action" and embracing the responsibility to teach for Truth and Reconciliation. They're finding that there are many tools out there to help them succeed. Many teachers utilize a pedagogy rooted in student inquiry to facilitate this learning. The inquiry approach is a wonderful opportunity for teachers to move metaphorically from the position of all-knowing sage *in front* of their students, to co-learning partner sitting *beside* their students. In addition, recent and ongoing changes to curriculum in all provinces means not only that teachers are required to teach Indigenous topics, but that ministries of education are required to provide resources and supports for those teachers. Realistically however, it will take more than resources or a change in pedagogy to facilitate the change that is needed in education. It will take some time and some dedicated work.

The truth is that reconciliation is about relationships, and you can't have a relationship with someone you don't know. A good place to start is to learn something about the Indigenous people with whom you share your land. It would be disappointing if students in Canadian classrooms learned more about the Maya and the Maori than they learned about the Salish and the Haudenosaunee. Every teacher in every classroom in Canada is teaching in a school that is physically connected to land that tells the story of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people in Canada. Every day our students walk and play on land that has a history and a significance to Indigenous people. Imagine what our relationship would look like if everyone understood that significance, that history, and better understood the people whose enduring presence demands reconciliation. If the truth comes before the reconciliation, then Canadian teachers are at the forefront of this country's future. It's not about teaching everything, it's about having the integrity and humility to teach something - and to teach it in a good way.

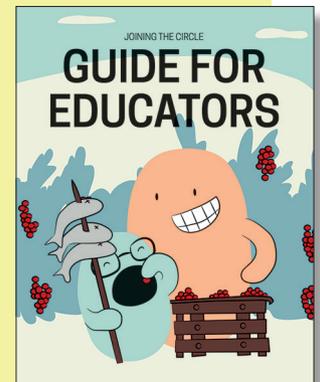
- Do, whenever possible, allow Indigenous people to speak for themselves. Inviting local Indigenous knowledge keepers into your classroom is an opportunity to forge new and ongoing relationships. If an Indigenous person cannot be present, there are excellent and well-vetted videos available.
- Don't start with cultural genocide and residential schools. Indigenous people are not victims first. Take the time to learn about the many proud and resilient people who were impacted by Canada's residential school system.
- Do learn about contemporary Indigenous people. Not only do they still exist, they are the fastest growing population in Canada.¹

Preparedness

Investing time to prepare yourself to teach Indigenous content is crucial to success and helps to build confidence. There are many opportunities available. For example, to better prepare yourself to teach Indigenous content, the Assembly of First Nations (AFN) offers a great online resource called *It's Our Time: The AFN Tool Kit*, available at www.afn.ca/education/toolkit. The tool kit has classroom resources, as well as "Plain Talks" available on iTunes, or as PDFs, that will provide you with information on a wide variety of Indigenous topics, from treaties to languages.

Resources for Teachers

- Online sources like goodminds.com or the *Martin Family Initiative* (www.themfi.ca) feature hundreds of vetted resources by Indigenous authors with clear curriculum connections across many subject areas.
- Universities and other education institutions often have great resources online. For the prairies, the University of Saskatchewan has an Indigenous Studies research portal you can find here: <http://iportal.usask.ca>
In the Eastern Woodlands, Queen's University has an outstanding website with Indigenous content: <http://guides.library.queensu.ca/aboriginal-curriculum-resources/native-studies-resources/websites>
On the West Coast, the University of British Columbia has K-12 curriculum resources available online: <http://guides.library.ubc.ca/IndigEdK12/curriculum>
- Provincial teachers' federations and other organizations may have resources specifically designed to assist teachers in their work to support truth and reconciliation education in their classrooms. For example, see *Joining the Circle: An Educator's Toolkit to Support First Nations, Métis and Inuit Students*, published in hard copy in October 2017 by the Ontario Teachers' Federation (OTF) and the Centre ontarien de prévention des agressions (COPA), and available at <http://copahabitat.ca/en/toolkits/joining-the-circle/guide-and-resources>
- For pan-Canadian topics like residential schools, check out the *Hundred Years of Loss* education kit developed by the Legacy of Hope Foundation. The "Kairos Blanket Exercise" offers an interactive exploration of Indigenous-Canadian relations with a focus on residential schools and reconciliation. It can be used in any classroom from Grade 4 to adult learners.



See the online version of this article at www.edcan.ca for live links to these resources.

Other ways to better prepare yourself include completing an online course, attending Indigenous events, participating in professional development activities offered through the school board or elsewhere, and engaging with Elders or knowledge keepers.

Resources for reconciliation

The best resources are human resources. Indigenous people have time-tested knowledge systems, education, governance, and ways of raising children that are sophisticated and beautiful; you won't regret taking the time to have conversations with Indigenous people in your community and learning about them. In some places, that isn't easy and there is much healing to do. Some places where you can find experts on these matters include friendship centres, Indigenous Studies departments and Indigenous student services at universities, and most importantly, the Indigenous education experts that many school boards employ.

There are also many print and multimedia resources. The number of Indigenous authors is on the rise, and you can find classroom resources by Indigenous authors, including kits, books, and digital tools. When choosing resources, think about your students and their interests. Choosing resources that are relevant to your area will also make the content more meaningful to your students and teach them about the diversity of Indigenous Nations.

When you are vetting resources, look for these four things:

- 1. Content and accuracy:** Make sure that the content makes sense and portrays Indigenous people in a whole-person, fair way.
- 2. Authorship:** Try to privilege Indigenous authors. There are also many non-Indigenous people with expertise in Indigenous studies, but it is important to make sure that they do have authentic

expertise. Do Internet searches to check authors' biographies and credentials.

- 3. Approachability:** Choose resources that reflect where you are and who your students are. You can also connect students' interests to Indigenous content. Choose a subject of interest and go from there.
- 4. Diversity:** Indigenous people have knowledge of content that touches on all subject areas, so teachers can integrate Indigenous content into any classroom. Including Indigenous content in every subject underlines the sophistication of Indigenous knowledge. You can also use Indigenous content to share diverse perspectives and compare mainstream and Indigenous views on historical and current events.

See "Resources for Teachers" for a list of just a few of the many good resources for the K-12 classroom.

You can be a part of the move to teach for Truth and Reconciliation. As Truth and Reconciliation Commission Chair Justice Murray Sinclair said, "...education, or what passed for it, got us into this situation, and education is what will lead us out."² Teachers have great responsibility to move our society forward. But we are teachers. We love learning. We love our students. We shape minds and societies. We are up to the challenge. **EC**

NOTE

- ¹ Statistics Canada, Census of Population, 2016.
- ² Excerpt from presentation by the Honourable Justice Murray Sinclair to the Senate Committee on Aboriginal Peoples, September 28, 2010, p.6. www.trc.ca/websites/trcinstitution/File/pdfs/senate%20speech_handout_copy_E_Final.pdf



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