

Case Report

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Heavy Truth Telling: Indigenous Pedagogy During the Recovery Of 215 Unmarked Children's Graves on One Canadian Indian Residential School Site

Shelly Johnson*

Thompson Rivers University, British Columbia, Canada

*Corresponding author: Shelly Johnson, Thompson Rivers University, Education, 805 TRU Way, Kamloops, British Columbia, Canada.

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Abstract

This case report identifies and discusses the Indigenous pedagogy in the development and implementation of a new online Master of Education Indigenous research course. It was taught at the time of the recovery of 215 unmarked Indigenous children's graves at the site of the Kamloops Indian Residential School in Canada located on the unceded and occupied lands of the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation. Master's students were international, Canadian and Indigenous. The case report links Indigenous methodologies, teaching, academic research and student-led research in the form of an Indigenous podcast series to further new knowledge development and translation.

Keywords: Indigenous; unmarked graves; Children; Residential schools; Canada; Pedagogy

Introduction

To respect Indigenous writing protocol, I self-identify as a Saulteaux/Ojibway First Nations woman scholar. I acknowledge that the unceded and occupied Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc First Nation lands upon which I live and work have always been a place of learning. I also acknowledge that the Secwépemc people who have lived on these lands since time immemorial have never signed their title or rights to their lands to Canada and remain sovereign people [1]. I am a Canada Research Chair in Indigenizing Higher Education and Associate Professor in the faculty of Education and Social Work at Thompson Rivers University (TRU).

In May and June 2021, during the Covid-19 pandemic, twenty international, Canadian, and Indigenous post-secondary students enrolled in a new online Master of Education Course, "Privileging

Indigenous oral traditions and story work in Indigenous international research." I worked with Indigenous community members and faculty of TRU and used Indigenous methodologies to develop the course. Three key instructions from community were that (1) the local Indigenous language, Secwepemctsin, be taught as a part of the course, (2) that the assignments be based on oral traditions rather than written assignments and (3) that wherever possible, Elders, local, national, and international community events or research be incorporated into the curriculum.

During the second week of classes, the Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc leadership announced the ground-penetrating radar recovery of 215 unmarked graves at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School (KIRS). It is one of more than 130 residential institutions

developed by Canada and Christian churches in efforts to assimilate Indigenous children into Canadian society. The KIRS operated between 1890 and 1978 as joint scheme between the Catholic church and the government of Canada. The announcement of unmarked graves created a profound impression on the students, faculty, and international countries. International and Canadian students in the course expressed shock, horror, and disbelief because of their lack of knowledge of Canada's historical genocidal policies against Indigenous peoples [2]. Many questioned why their education to date in secondary and post-secondary education was so lacking in Indigenous content.

However, it was less of a shock for many Indigenous students and peoples who grew up with the oral histories and experiences of Indigenous family members and survivors [3]. In addition to the stories of missing and murdered children, rape, starvation physical, emotional, mental and spiritual abuse by clergy, employees and older youth that are well documented in the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, there are important Calls to Action [4].

The duality of knowledge regarding Canada's genocidal behavior towards Indigenous peoples, and specifically against vulnerable Indigenous children created unforeseen learning and teaching opportunities. Some students were parents of children of the same ages as those found in the unmarked graves (three years to youth in their late teens), and others were single or child-free. All were in disbelief at the lack of humanity with which the children were buried. The student and professor responses to the announcement will be discussed next.

Case Presentation

The class directly after the recovery of the 215 unmarked graves at Tke'mlups te Secwépemc began in a somber and reflective way. Some students expressed anger, others cried, and some were silent. I opened an opportunity to set aside the planned lessons of the day to make space for students to participate in a virtual talking circle. The purpose is to provide a safe space to process feelings and thoughts, and that confidentiality be respected once the class and course conclude. The talking circle begins and ends with a prayer and an explanation that only one student may speak one at a time and only from their own perspective. The role of the rest of the group is to listen, until it is their time to speak, and there are no interruptions. We used a virtual "talking stick" and passed it person to person until all had an opportunity to express and process their feelings.

One outcome of the talking circle and course was a request from a student to her colleagues. During the final class she stated "This can't be the end of this learning experience. Does anyone else feel a responsibility to help other post-secondary students understand the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada and how it impacts us all today?" The result was that four master's students agreed to collaborate on an Indigenous-themed podcast series that is currently in development. Two are international students, one is a first generation Canadian and one is a First Nations student. None had any experience with podcasting but believe it will be an effective teaching tool. To date the students have received

ethics approval, identified a broad range of Indigenous peoples to interview including Indigenous Elders and leaders, developed the podcast questions, identified and chosen music, learned how to facilitate and revise a podcast interview. The series is set to air in the fall of 2022, and will be available to TRU students, faculty, and a national audience.

Conclusion

It is a unique experience to have students develop and implement an Indigenous podcast series at the conclusion of any course. Could it be that the Indigenous research methodologies that were used as course development foundational principles encouraged this request? Could it be that a respectful acknowledgement of the unceded lands and traditional owners of the lands upon which the unmarked graves were recovered during the course impacted the student actions? Could it be that the learning was relevant for students and communities, and that reciprocity was enacted in the learning? Both students and community were to benefit from the learning and teaching. All the students gained new knowledge as a function of the course. Their question was "What has the local Indigenous community gained as a result of our learning, particularly one traumatized by the recovery of Indigenous child remains?" Indigenous epistemology aims to disrupt Western or dominant discourse in the academy, including those found in Indigenous academic research. One relational feature of Indigenous research and writing privileges Indigenous self-positioning and self-identification as a first step to introducing and reinforcing Indigenous scholars' social relationships. It supports the importance of building Indigenous connections with and between peoples, communities, and cultures. Other features aim to make Indigenous space for personal storytelling, acknowledgment of Indigenous knowledge-making practices, protocols, and languages, and the inclusion of Elders' contributions to existing knowledge [5]. The development and implementation of an Indigenous-themed podcast series aims to support all these objectives, and to demonstrate that we can work together in respectful, relevant and reciprocal ways.

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Conflict of Interest

None.

References

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