Belonging and Othering in Research and Education:
Bringing Indigenous Voices into the Classroom

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This article explores the use of Two-Eyed Seeing as a guiding framework to bring Indigenous and Western knowledges alongside one another in post-secondary art education. In response to growing calls for decolonization in education, the research highlights the need for culturally responsive pedagogy, relational accountability, and authentic engagement with Indigenous communities. Rooted in decolonization and Indigenous methodologies such as Storywork, the research centers Indigenous voices through collaborative workshop design led by Indigenous knowledge holders and artists. The study emphasizes the educator's responsibility to move beyond tokenism, engage in critical self-reflection, and build reciprocal relationships. Two-Eyed Seeing fosters transformative learning by valuing diverse knowledge systems equally and supporting student connection, creativity, and relationality. The article critically examines the challenges non-Indigenous educators face in decolonizing curricula, including fear, lack of preparation, and systemic barriers. It calls for education that is co-created, reflective, and committed to centering Indigenous perspectives in meaningful, sustained, and respectful ways.

Key words: Two-Eyed Seeing, decolonization, Indigenous education, art education, culturally responsive pedagogy.

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Relationality of the Researcher, Current Research, and Two-Eyed Seeing in Art Education

The role of the educator is one that is constantly evolving, particularly as it relates to culturally responsive pedagogies and practices to address the needs of diverse learners as interconnectedness and globalization continue to bring different cultures closer together (Bartz & Bartz, 2018; Samuels, 2018). At the same time, the criticisms towards colonialism continue to grow, leading to increased calls for decolonization within educational curricula (Poitras Pratt et al., 2018). A crucial element in decolonization discourse is focused on bringing Indigenous voices and Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing alongside Western ways of knowing in the classroom; a complex process which requires an awareness of the generational injustices experienced by Indigenous peoples throughout the history of colonization (Dei & Cacciavillani, 2024). The methods of bringing Indigenous knowledges into the classroom in respectful, reciprocal, and authentic ways requires careful attention and collaboration with Indigenous communities and knowledge holders. One potential path forward might be found in Two-Eyed Seeing, a concept of learning focused on seeing the world through one eye with Indigenous ways of knowing – and with the other eye, seeing the world through Western ways of knowing (Hatcher et al., 2009; Jeffrey et al., 2021; Poitras Pratt et al., 2018). By understanding each worldview separately, the individual is able to bring those knowledges together to see the world with fresh perspectives (Hatcher et al., 2009). In application, Two-Eyed Seeing requires a multifaceted approach, with a significant amount of learning and development placed on the non-Indigenous educator as they learn new skills and build relationships with Indigenous community members and knowledge holders (Hatcher et al., 2009; Jeffrey et al., 2021; Poitras Pratt et al., 2018). This article explores the opportunities and challenges of using Two-Eyed Seeing as a framework for bringing Indigenous and Western knowledges alongside one another in art education spaces, the responsibilities of educators in decolonizing curricula, as well as looking at the steps required to create learning spaces that centre Indigenous voices in the classroom.

Relationality of the Researcher

As an educator and PhD candidate, my current research is focused on bringing Indigenous knowledges into art education spaces and making Indigenous perspectives a core aspect of the coursework alongside Western knowledges and Western artistic techniques. Within Indigenous research, the relationality of the researcher plays a substantial role in creating relationships and situating the researcher within the research itself (Kovach, 2021). As a non-First Nations, Métis, or Inuit educator, I take a non-Indigenous position within the research process. As someone indigenous to Iran, seeing the world through Persian and Western worldviews through my Western education in Canada, the barriers (as well as perceived barriers) to bringing First Nations, Métis, or Inuit knowledges into the classroom are still present for me, as they are with many non-Indigenous educators. While the peers that I have engaged with as a community member, practicing artist, student, and educator have all been made up of a diverse collective of individuals, the Eurocentric lens within classrooms and curricula have not evolved to match the lived experiences of students. Colonial legacies continue to impact and shape how we see our national identity, how we package and transmit knowledge in the classroom, and beyond that, these legacies impact the implicit biases and stereotypes that place Western perspectives at the centre of the Canadian education system.

It wasn't until late in my MFA program that I realized how little exposure I had to Indigenous knowledges and perspectives *from* Indigenous communities, individuals, or knowledge holders. Despite this, I had previously felt that I was well informed about Indigenous experiences because of what I had been taught through a Western lens. During a workshop seminar with a visiting Indigenous artist, Peter Morin of the Crow Clan of the Tahlton Nation, I was suddenly confronted with the understanding that everything I thought I knew about Indigenous knowledges was most likely wrong. Or, if it was not wrong, it was information about Indigenous experiences that had been heavily filtered through Western perspectives. While I had continuously spent my life aware of how Western perspectives viewed my own Persian culture, where I had firsthand experience of Persian worldviews, I had little to no experience engaging in the similar ways with Indigenous First Nations, Métis, or Inuit worldviews – and entering into this area of research required that I turn decolonization practices inward and begin the process of unlearning to relearn what I knew about Indigenous histories, experiences, and knowledges.

At the core of my teaching philosophy is actively engaging with culturally responsive pedagogies and creating diverse, inclusive spaces where students feel a sense of belonging, where students learn from one another as they work to understand their own relationality and engage with Indigenous perspectives. Throughout the course of my research, applying a decolonization approach to the classroom and curricula moved beyond working solely in my own classroom and expanded to look at the challenges and opportunities from the perspectives of Indigenous knowledge holders, non-Indigenous educators, and diverse student populations as a means of contributing to the larger discourse of decolonization and Indigenous education in Canada.

Two-Eyed Seeing

Two-Eyed Seeing captured my attention because it provided a framework for balancing Indigenous and Western ways of knowing alongside one another. Two-Eyed Seeing, or *Etuaptmumk*, was introduced by Mi'kmaq Elder Albert Marshall (Hatcher et al., 2009). Originally developed to support Indigenous students in Western education, the framework highlights the strengths of both knowledge systems without placing more importance on one over the other (Bardwell & Woller-Skar, 2023). By viewing Indigenous and Western perspectives as equally valid and interconnected, education can become a transformational force—one that fosters critical reflection, builds relationships across worldviews, and envisions new educational futures beyond colonial paradigms (Hatcher et al., 2009; St. Denis, 2011). Two-Eyed Seeing is particularly valuable in education, as it fosters inclusive and culturally responsive teaching (Acharibasam & McVittie, 2021). By presenting Indigenous and Western worldviews as equally valid, it challenges students to think critically and engage with diverse perspectives. At the same time, however, there is a need to centre Indigenous knowledges within the framework, which is critical to the framework's ability to rebalance education and focus on local contexts (Poitras Pratt et al., 2018). The Two-Eyed Seeing framework not only expands how students understand knowledge and knowledge generation, but also encourages relationality—an Indigenous principle centered on interconnectedness, reciprocity, and respect for all life from the local level to the global level (Bartlett et al., 2012; Poitras Pratt et al., 2018).

The first major challenge in the research project was learning how to conceptualize and communicate the framework. A non-Indigenous educator doesn't *teach* Indigenous ways of knowing. What the non-Indigenous educator can do is *engage* with Indigenous knowledges, by placing Indigenous voices and perspectives at the centre of the work. It creates a space where the

educator can step back and recognize that they are also in the active process of learning. Another challenge to conceptualizing was envisioning what bringing Indigenous and Western ways of knowing would look like. It wasn't the process of weaving, because the two knowledge systems weren't being braided together. Indigenous knowledges sit separate but alongside Western ways of knowing. Two-Eyed Seeing could be viewed as two boats traveling alongside one another, offering different perspectives of the world but still heading in the same direction. Bringing the two worldviews together meant expanding the field of vision and giving the viewer a fuller sense of the world around them.

Current Research Project: Two-Eyed Seeing in Art Education

The aims of the research project were to create a four-part workshop for post-secondary art learners that provided them the opportunity to engage with Indigenous ways of knowing and artistic practice in ways that allowed them to begin to expand their own perspectives. Within the history of Indigenous research, significant, long-term generational harm and trauma has been caused by researching *on* Indigenous populations, rather than researching *for* the direct (and desired) benefit to Indigenous communities (Kovach, 2021). To address and minimize this risk, the research project was designed to be developed directly in collaboration within Indigenous knowledge holders, with Two-Eyed Seeing and Decolonization as the frameworks, while Storywork and Storytelling as Methodology were selected as the methodologies, all of which work together to centre Indigenous knowledges and self-determination throughout every layer of the research study. Each of the four 90-minute workshops would be led by an Indigenous knowledge holder and/or practicing artist, who would speak to their own personal experiences but not share Indigenous community knowledge. The workshop sessions would be designed to provide learners with different perspectives, informing their creation of an ephemeral art piece that could be installed outdoors in natural environments, and that would decompose naturally over time. The materials would be sustainably harvested or provided, and from the local environment in and around the University of Calgary as a way to connect the learning to the land.

While the design of the initial stages of the workshops was based in research and ethical considerations, the next (and current at the time of writing) phase of the research was centred around building relationships with Indigenous knowledge holders and beginning the collaboration process to design each of the four workshops. One of the primary concerns among non-Indigenous educators is the fear of making mistakes, or a struggle with how to authentically and respectfully engage with Indigenous ways of knowing, often due to a lack of lived experience or cultural understanding (Carroll et al., 2020; McKinley, 2020). Developing relationships takes time, while also requiring a level of understanding of how to respectfully reach out and create the foundational relationships to begin a collaborative process. It's one that the average non-Indigenous educator does not receive training for, with little to limited support from administrations when it comes to starting the process (McKinley, 2020). In my position as a non-Indigenous researcher, I had to become comfortable with making mistakes and missteps, while also ensuring that once I became aware of the mistake, I worked diligently to correct it and not make the same misstep again. This process is one that non-Indigenous educators must become comfortable with when moving into Indigenous-led knowledge sharing, and centering Indigenous voices in the classroom.

While the research currently remains in the collaboration stage, the challenges and opportunities among Indigenous knowledge holder participants will be collected through

one-on-one interview processes grounded in Indigenous Storywork and Storytelling as methodology, which provide a methodological framework for participants to share their lived experiences through oral storytelling practices. An additional component of the research is focused on the experiences of learner participants as they engage with Two-Eyed Seeing in art education settings, and take part in informal Talking Circles where the learner participants can share their experiences with their peers through storytelling. It is hoped that the research study will contribute to the understanding of how non-Indigenous educators and Indigenous knowledge holders can respectfully seek to build relationships and work alongside one another to bring Indigenous knowledges alongside Western knowledges in the classroom.

The Call for Decolonization in Education

The increasing call for decolonization in the classroom, and within the education system as a whole, requires a fundamental shift in how knowledge is taught or transmitted, valued, and understood. While the aim of education is to impart valuable information, teach specific practices, and develop student competency, it is more difficult to define what we mean by knowledge and decolonizing knowledge (Clemens, 2020). Decolonizing knowledge is difficult, as it requires setting aside the difference that knowledge must be true or false, and instead recognize that knowledge is contingent on the context and perspective it derives from (Clemens, 2020). To decolonize knowledge, the Western belief that there is only one correct, true or false, form of knowledge needs to be challenged and reframed to support and invite diverse knowledges and ways of knowing, while recognizing that no one knowledge system is more valuable than others (Clemens, 2020; Poitras Pratt et al., 2018).

Decolonizing education is not about adding in additional knowledge systems within the existing Western belief structure towards knowledge. Decolonization instead requires a complete transformation of pedagogy, as well as identifying and shifting power structures and relationships (Clemens, 2020; Poitras Pratt et al., 2018). At its heart, decolonization is meant to break or undo colonial systems, but it can also be a mechanism for critical reflection and recognition of knowledge constraints within colonial processes, and making room for alternative paths forward (Shahjahan et al., 2022). When inviting Indigenous ways of knowing into the classroom alongside Western ways of knowing, decolonization must be addressed first. At the same time, laying a decolonizing foundation benefits students of all backgrounds, as it creates space for a multiplicity of knowledge systems that students can engage with (Clemens, 2020; Poitras Pratt et al., 2018).

Challenges in Decolonizing Education

There is a common fear among a large percentage of educators when it comes to teaching outside their field of expertise, especially when the educators have been trained in Western academic institutions (Baraskas & Gladwin, 2021; McKinley, 2020; Mitchell et al., 2018). The call for decolonization of curricula amid educators' fears of teaching outside their comfort zones is an area that requires dedicated attention, or feeling as though they are not culturally qualified to bring Indigenous knowledges into the classroom (Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021; Mitchell et al., 2018; Scott & Gani, 2018). The uncertainties and fears often lead to avoidance, which can result in the exclusion of Indigenous perspectives from the classroom altogether (Barkaskas & Gladwin, 2021; McKinley, 2020). It is not that Indigenous knowledges need to be *taught*, but that Indigenous voices need to be invited in (Jacob et al., 2015). Indigenous voices and perspectives should be layered throughout every facet of the education system, which includes

areas of learning and research (Jacob et al., 2015). Additionally, these Indigenous voices need to be driven by the self-determination of Indigenous peoples, which requires collaboration and the non-Indigenous educator taking up the role of learner alongside their students (Jacob et al., 2015; McKinley, 2020).

Responsibilities of Educators

To engage with decolonization in the classroom requires that educators make concerted efforts to expand their own learning and focus on moving beyond tokenism, or the appearance of diversity and inclusion practices in the classroom. Tokenism often appears in the classroom as a symbolic gesture, which on the surface appears to be inclusive but does not lead to transformational change that supports decolonization or reconciliation (Cooper et al., 2021). Tokenism might be found in the inclusion of Indigenous voices through the addition of one Indigenous literature in the curriculum, while the course as a whole still only reflects dominant Western views, or when the educator engages with Indigenous experiences from a Western lens, rather than create dedicated, centred spaces around Indigenous voices. The process of decolonization in the classroom is an ongoing practice, as is the inclusion of the Two-Eyed Seeing framework when bringing Indigenous and Western knowledges alongside one another.

Part of this process requires that educators routinely engage in self-reflection and unlearning, which requires a critical examination of their own relationship and conditioning by Western knowledge systems, and identifying and addressing their own (conscious or unconscious) biases and assumptions (Carroll et al., 2020). It is also crucial that Indigenous voices be invited into the classroom, and the responsibility of building reciprocal relationships falls on the non-Indigenous educator.

Meaningful inclusion of Indigenous knowledges, voices, and perspectives requires direct collaboration with Indigenous knowledge holders, and to accomplish this and build direct connections to Indigenous community members, the non-Indigenous educator should seek to build authentic relationships based on mutual respect and commitment to maintain the relationships over the long-term (Kovach, 2021; Webb & Mashford-Pringle, 2022). At the centre of this, there should be a focus on repairing relationships with Indigenous communities on the individual level, and seeking not to embed Indigenous content into the classroom from Eurocentric perspectives, but to empower Indigenous communities to share and transmit their knowledge with self-determination (Dei & Cacciavillani, 2024). Indigenous perspectives should be embedded authentically into the curricula and classrooms, and developing relationships of mutual respect and knowledge sharing are at the foundation of the learning (Carroll et al., 2020; McKinley, 2020).

Decolonizing education is an ongoing process, requiring critical reflection and attention over time. Educators must be committed to learning, adapting, and challenging the existing structures that maintain colonial frameworks and the idea that there is only one correct form of knowledge. Rather than place the burden of decolonial work on Indigenous and marginalized educators or communities, non-Indigenous educators must also be willing to contribute to decolonial practices within education and seek to continuously push forward, while overcoming feelings of personal discomfort that are experienced along the way.

Conclusion

Embracing Two-Eyed Seeing and engaging in the foundational, ongoing groundwork of decolonization in the classroom requires more than adjusting the language and adding tokenistic

activities that appear inclusive (Poitras Pratt et al., 2018; Dei & Cacciavillani, 2024; Tuck & Yang, 2012). Within the current research project, Two-Eyed Seeing and Decolonization have provided a framework of ongoing reflection and centering of Indigenous voices and perspectives, while storytelling as a means of collecting experiences among the participants provides a bridge between Indigenous oral traditions and Western qualitative research practices. There will be ongoing challenges and difficulties to overcome as knowledge systems are brought alongside one another, and these processes require active commitment from educators and institutions, as well as ongoing learning and a deep willingness to shift and dislodge colonial structures. The benefit lies with creating a classroom where all students can connect to their cultural knowledge systems, while learning to see the world through alternative ways without perpetuating a negative sense of Other.

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