

# Transforming Online Teaching Through Relational Ways Of Being

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*We explore the need for educators to design, implement, and assess online education for Indigenous students with intention and in a good way. As more Indigenous learners access online programs, it is essential to amplify the discussion on how post-secondary education institutions can better design educational programs and support learners through intentionally engaging in relational ways of being.*

*Drawing from our experience delivering the Professional Project Administrator Program, we examine the significance of partnership building in enhancing cultural learning within the online space. We highlight the need for intentional faculty development initiatives and discuss the challenges that became an avenue for unlearning and educational innovation. Furthermore, we delve into the design and implementation of a holistic rubric tailored specifically to support the implementation of relational pedagogies. We hope that these learnings offer useful lessons for online teaching, emphasizing the need to foster culturally responsive environments where learners can thrive.*

As a result of the COVID-19 Pandemic, the proliferation of online learning programs has transformed the landscape of post-secondary education, providing greater access and opportunities to learn regardless of physical location. As technology continues to shape the way institutions deliver educational programs for Indigenous students, it is essential to discuss how relational practices, as well as Indigenous knowledge systems, can enrich the online learning experience, emphasizing the importance of fostering culturally responsive educational settings through collaboration, faculty development, and comprehensive assessment methods.

As Team *Shakamohta* (the Michif word meaning connect), we were responsible for the delivery of the Professional Project Administrator (PPA) Program at Royal Roads University, an 18-week online certificate aimed at developing a broad range of skills in project administration. After reflecting on our experience delivering the program and weaving together our areas of expertise with our diverse identities and positionalities, we identified the three main topics that

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we discuss in this paper. Our learning is ongoing, and we are aware of the complexities of working in higher education, where Euro-Western worldviews and practices can hinder the potential to offer education *in a good way* (Ferland, et al., 2021; University of Calgary, 2017). Nevertheless, we are committed to indigenization and to amplifying the voices of our students who transform the way we teach.

Since the first offering of the PPA Program in October of 2020, we strived to honour and nurture the whole learner—culturally, emotionally, and intellectually—wherever they were in their life’s journey. Through credit and non-credit courses, the goal was to develop learners' skills in project administration, including skills such as proposal writing, budgeting, data management and reporting, communication, teamwork, and presentation skills. We also integrated language, cultural activities, and the collective leadership course based on Indigenous worldviews. We incorporated experiential learning by including cultural teachings, engaging learners with local community mentors, and building strong relationships with partner Nations.

Through a research study that we conducted in previous years, we learned that four elements of program design need to be interwoven to facilitate student success: A caring community, wraparound supports, relevant knowledge/skills, and cultural learning (Cortés et al., 2023). This relational approach embedded in culture and community has created the conditions to deliver a program that has been successful in facilitating meaningful learning and graduating students.

Nonetheless, incorporating relational ways of being and naturalizing Indigenous knowledge systems in the online space presents a complex challenge, one that requires an understanding of cultural context and historical injustices. Wilson et al. (2020) share, “while it is relatively easy to add Indigenous content to any university course, more often than not, when that content is delivered, there is a disconnect between the content, the context in which it is taught, and the pedagogy used to teach it” (p. 11). Efforts to incorporate relational ways of being can be hindered by a lack of awareness and cultural sensitivity among instructors or staff.

In this paper, we expand on the Woven Elements of Program Design (Cortés et al., 2023) and put theory into practice by examining the significance of partnership building in enhancing cultural learning within the online space. We highlight the need for intentional faculty development initiatives and discuss the challenges of indigenizing online teaching. Finally, we describe the elements of a holistic rubric and its implications for cultivating relational ways of being while maintaining academic rigour.

Our goal is that these efforts to indigenize online teaching and naturalize relational ways of being will serve as a guide for post-secondary education institutions (PSE) as they expand educational program offerings for Indigenous learners.

## **Partnership Building and Cultural Learning**

Cultivating authentic partnerships between Indigenous Nations/organizations and PSE institutions requires time, respect, and a genuine commitment to Indigenous self-determination and sovereignty (Christopher et al., 2018; Wahbe et al., 2007). To work with partners in a

respectful way, PSE institutions must anticipate and plan for extended timelines, prepare for leadership turnover, and secure sources of funding to offer wraparound supports and cultural learning.

Having partnered with various Nations/organizations to co-design and deliver the PPA Program in the past years, we have witnessed the significant role that partners played in advising the university on content, program design, and cultural learning. Although we had to align the deadlines set by the funder with the needs and timelines of the partners, we are grateful for the financial support that enabled us to run cultural learning programs, which have been essential to strengthen students' self-efficacy and identity (Cortés et al., 2023, Smith, 2012).

Cultural learning is essential to Indigenous ways of being, most notably in online learning environments where students do not physically reside in community with one another or share together in cultural gatherings and ceremonies (Cochrane & Maposa, 2019). Grounded in the principle of bringing the university to the community, Royal Roads University offers learners a fully online synchronous and asynchronous program which includes a variety of wraparound supports, and co-curricular activities that contribute to the holistic learning experience for students, with cultural teachings at the forefront.

Throughout the PPA program, cultural teachings were purposefully woven into the curriculum with the purpose of honouring and celebrating Indigenous culture and identity. For instance, local community Elders supported students by being available for advice and sharing stories from their own lives and their Nation's history via the cohorts' online community spaces.

Similarly, one partner organization arranged and coordinated a 16-week cultural program, where Knowledge Keepers were invited as guest speakers from week to week, sharing with students through traditional storytelling, language, and hands-on demonstrations and activities. In other instances, local artists facilitated online sessions to work on beading, weaving, cooking, or moccasin making. All students received their kits via mail and gathered online to work on their projects every week.

It is clear from our previous research (Cortés et al., 2023), and from what students have shared, that cultural learning contributes to students' self-efficacy and to an overall sense of community. As one student shared:

It was very empowering hearing about other cultures like the Wetsuwet'en and hearing the similarities in our ancestral ways of being was just very uplifting, and to see the passion and hear the passion come through their talks and discussions, it was very empowering and made me want to be there, it made me want to be at the university. This is something that I've never experienced at other institutions.

Partnerships with Indigenous Nations/organizations can impact and transform how PSE institutions deliver programs to all students by encouraging a more culturally aware, inclusive, and respectful learning environment that values different ways of knowing, being, and doing (Greenfield, 2020). Without a doubt, a collaboration where the partner is active and/or oversees

the cultural learning is a model of program design that we will continue to foster in future deliveries of the PPA Program.

## **Faculty Development to Indigenize Online Teaching**

One of the goals of our institution, is to engage in a process of indigenization: “Rebalancing power and control in the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and valuing, making space for, inviting and welcoming Indigenous people and Indigenous ways of knowing and being into an institution” (Wilson et al., 2020, p. 8).

For the PPA Program, the goal is to increase representation of Indigenous instructors and to naturalize Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). In practice, this means that rather than complementing the Western curriculum, IKS become the norm (Rodriguez de France, 2023). Throughout this paper, we use the term IKS in the plural to emphasize the diversity of Indigenous peoples, epistemologies, and ontologies (Battiste, 2013; Munroe et. al., 2013; Wilson, 2008).

Beyond representation of Indigenous instructors, it is essential to create a positive and culturally safe learning environment for students. Hence the focus on finding instructors who are respectful, open-minded, and committed to learning and decolonizing their courses and teaching styles. This process of *un*learning refers to identifying and deconstructing colonial ideologies of the superiority and privilege of Western thought and approaches (Antoine et al., 2018).

Regardless of the commitments toward indigenization and the caring community that our program strives to create, some learners experienced transactional teaching behaviours and situations that negatively impacted their motivation to stay in the program. The legacy of colonization, cultural genocide, and the historical exclusion from higher education has a great impact on many students who have significant obstacles to overcome and arrive at the program with varied levels of education and needs (Alfred, 2004; Pitman et al., 2017). If well-intended instructors lack the context and understanding of this reality and fail to provide the care and scaffolding needed, students' self-efficacy will be negatively impacted. This lack of confidence can lead to attrition, continuing the systemic barriers that have impacted Indigenous communities for generations. Some of the practices that intimidated and disempowered learners include lack of care and respect, patronizing communication styles, unrealistic behavioural expectations, rigid assignment deadlines, and assessment standards that do not accommodate students' learning needs (personal communication, May 4, 2023).

As Burke et al. (2020) explain, “Indigenous students feel seen and heard when values such as reciprocity, whole-person learning and intellectual knowledge combined with physical, spiritual and emotional knowledge is incorporated” (para.8). Therefore, instructors need to be flexible, compassionate, relational, and holistic in their approach to teaching and learning.

Research findings (Cortés et al., 2023) strongly suggested the need for actions toward the indigenization of the curriculum; as a result, various initiatives were implemented. Staff and faculty of the PPA Program were trained in Indigenous cultural safety as well as principles and approaches to decolonization of the curriculum. One instructor shared, “I’m better able to

understand... the impact of colonialism...Having these sessions where we were able to go so much deeper and further and talk about the ways that it impacted somebody's ability to learn, the ways that it impacted somebody's ability to interact with other people". The training helped instructors recognize the impact of colonization and identify systems of oppression. It also enhanced their capacity to learn about Indigenous Knowledge Systems.

Another initiative was the creation of a Community of Practice (CoP) through online sharing circles where instructors talked about their experiences, challenges, successes, and learnings in a supportive environment. Wenger et al. (2022) discuss the impact that CoPs can have in enhancing teaching and learning, where educators can exchange pedagogical approaches, explore strategies for student engagement, and facilitate a sense of belonging and camaraderie. The sharing circles allowed space for all to share while promoting collaboration and alignment of the courses' learning outcomes and pedagogy. For instance, all PPA program instructors have access to each other's online courses to encourage collaboration and further the program's goals. This level of transparency and ongoing communication among contract instructors is rare in our university.

Naturalizing relational ways of being in PSE involves an intentional strategy to support faculty development: recruiting and maintaining Indigenous instructors, finding non-Indigenous instructors who are a good fit, providing training, and promoting collaboration and shared learning through communities of practice. These elements, woven together, can transform online teaching by fostering a more caring and inclusive environment where everyone can thrive.

## **Relational Ways of Being**

We are committed to education because we believe in possibilities; however, we must be aware of the pitfalls of education. As Battiste (2013) states, "education can be liberating, or it can domesticate and maintain domination. It can sustain colonization in neo-colonial ways, or it can decolonize" (p. 175). Many scholars and educators (Fernandez, 2019; Freire, 2005; hooks, 2001) strongly advocate for re-humanization, liberation, and conscientization in response to the systems of oppression embedded in education and in society at large. All these perspectives have love at the core. According to hooks (2001), "when we work with love, we renew the spirit; that renewal is an act of self-love, it nurtures our growth" (p. 65). For Elder Jim Dumont, renewing the spirit gives us life and hope, and it is the base on which we grow our physical, mental, and emotional wellbeing (Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2020).

Our goal is to cultivate an online environment where learners can bring their whole selves, their stories, and their culture into the learning space. However, love-based or relational pedagogies that recognize the interconnectedness of emotional, spiritual, physical, and cognitive processes are often rejected by instructors who believe that their subject area is value neutral and, therefore, there is no need to integrate emotion or spiritual learning outcomes, let alone care about the humanity behind the *student*.

The struggle for indigenization and reaffirmation of Indigenous Knowledge Systems is pervasive in post-secondary education. The attention to a holistic approach that embraces the

spiritual learning domain is unusual, if not rare, due in part to conflated ideas of spirituality and religion. These misconceptions stem from the colonial legacy of silencing and marginalizing Indigenous voices, ancestral wisdom, connection to the Land, and holistic understanding (Cote-Meek, 2014).

According to LaFever (2016), relational learning outcomes are based on the spiritual domain: “honouring, attention to relationships, developing a sense of belonging, feeling empowered to pursue a unique path, developing self-knowledge of purpose, and ultimately transcendence of narrow self-interest” (p. 416). Similarly, Antoine et al. (2018) encourage educators to consider the following questions:

- Do the learning outcomes emphasize spiritual development?
- Have you included learning activities that are land-based, narrative, intergenerational, relational, experiential, and/or multimodal?
- Is the assessment holistic in nature?

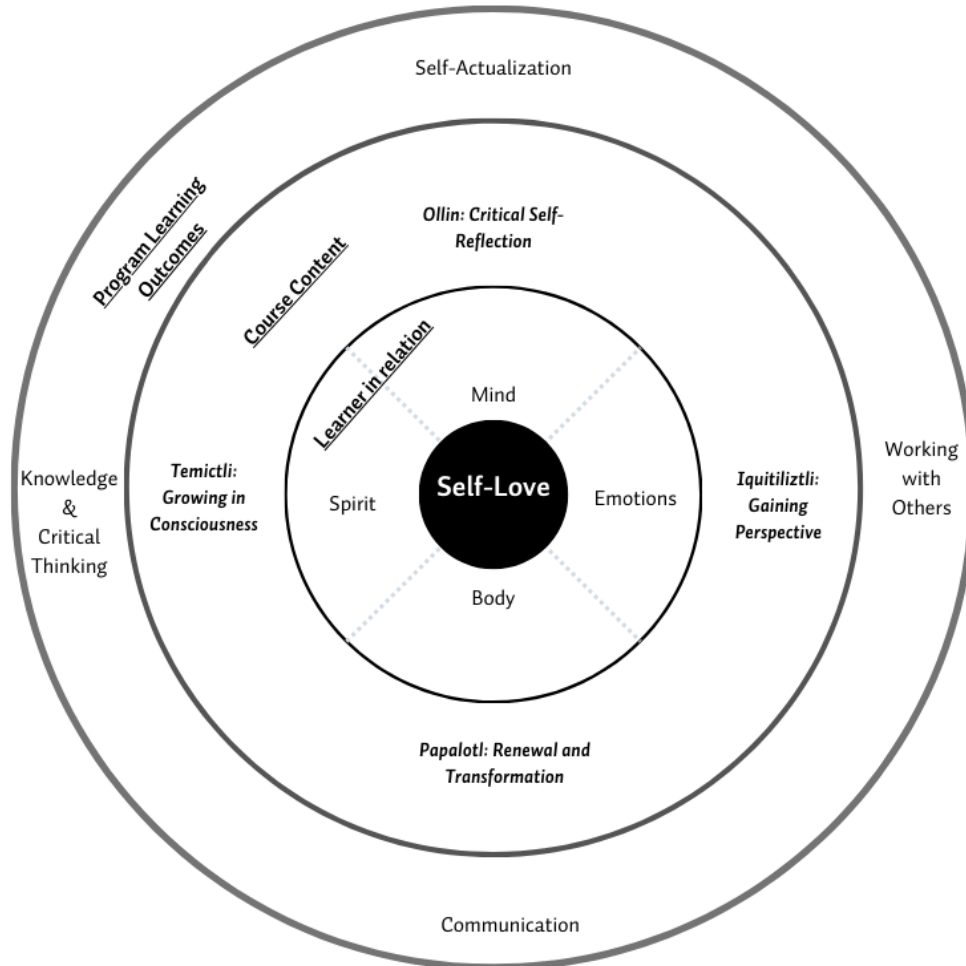
From the first delivery of the PPA Program, the instructors (Appendix A) of the collective leadership course strived to affirm and celebrate the culture of the learning community, contextualize the learning, and focus on Indigenous resurgence (Starblanket, 2018). The course is organized into four units or movements inspired by Mexica cosmology, Anishinaabe teachings, and other Indigenous Knowledge systems—including those of the learning community. Our research shows that the course was relevant and significant for learners who shared statements such as, “this is the content that changes the world”, “my favourite part culturally was definitely collective leadership”, “the component with collective leadership I felt created a very safe environment with an Indigenous lens and it was a really beautiful way to start the program in a good way”, “there was just something about the [collective leadership] course and the sense of community that we had so quickly and the dignity and respect everyone had for each other”.

As a way of fostering holistic student learning within the collective leadership course, co-instructor Candice Cook mentioned the Medicine Wheel as a potential guide for assessment. LaFever (2016), based on the Medicine Wheel, identified learning outcomes for physical, emotional, intellectual, and spiritual domains through the Four-Domain Framework (p. 417). The work of LaFever, Antoine et al. (2018), the Thunderbird Partnership Foundation (2020), as well as the TIAHUI (Nahuatl for moving forward) Framework (Fernandez et al., 2023) inspired the Four Movements Rubric, which includes the visual (Figure 1) and the aspirations statements (Appendix B).

The instructors shared the rubric with the students at the beginning of the course to show the overview of the course, to share the *aspirations* (learning outcomes), and to guide the *demonstrations of learning* (assignments of the course). Through questions and dialogue, instructors encouraged learners to demonstrate all these elements in their work.

## Figure 1

### *Four Movements Rubric*



*Note.* The Four Movements Rubric was created for the PPA Collective Leadership course. It guides the learner towards fulfilling the aspirations/learning outcomes of the course. Inspired by the work of Marcella LaFever (2016). Adapted by Valeria Cortés.

As shown in Figure 1, self-love is at the core of the rubric because it is in the process of loving oneself that we can challenge the ideology of colonization and dehumanization. As Gonzalez (2019) states, “colonization’s primary strategy is self-hate, therefore the most radical decolonizing concept we can teach...is self-love; to help our students learn to love their humanity” (p. 235). Based on what learners have told us, we can infer that centering love, humanity, and cultural identity strongly relates to the increase in confidence. As one learner shared, “I was encouraged to see leadership differently and was shown a model that felt right for my way of being”.

The next circle refers to the four knowledge domains that are common in Indigenous epistemologies and interweave all aspects of learning: body, mind, spirit, and emotions. In addition, this circle relates to what Tunison (2007) describes as *learning spirit* or the interrelationships that exist between the learner and their unique learning journey. It also affirms the learning process as a collective endeavour, woven through the learning community.

The third circle shows the course content. In this case, it identifies the four modules of the course, inspired by TIAHUI (2023) a decolonial framework for pedagogy and practice that includes Nahua teachings of *Nahui Ollin* (four movements). The outer circle represents the learning outcomes identified by the program.

Undoubtedly, there is opportunity for future research, review, and application of this rubric in other courses within the PPA Program and beyond. The content of the collective leadership course aligns with TIAHUI and with what Freire (2018) describes as conscientization. However, in any course there are opportunities to naturalize decolonial and rehumanizing pedagogies and advocate for worldview where humanity is intricately woven with all aspects of life. This is an invitation to all involved in the learning process to collectively construct learning from everyone's lived experiences; to identify power and privilege; to acknowledge what worldview is prioritized; whose voices are heard and whose stories are told. It is a way for all to see "education as the practice of freedom" (hooks, 1994, p.13) and to take an active role in the learning process towards intellectual and spiritual growth.

Transforming online teaching requires a process that goes beyond implementing a holistic rubric, digital learning tools and practices (Cortés, 2021; Martin et al., 2022;), or models such as Universal Design for Learning (Uskov et al., 2019), or Trauma-Informed Teaching (Costa, 2020). Any course is imbued with the perspectives, biases, and agendas of those who designed it. Therefore, we invite educators to recognize the historical, political, and economic forces that reinforce inequality, to acknowledge what worldview is prioritized, and to identify the behaviours and practices that might be in the way of cultivating self-love.

## Conclusion

Indigenous communities in remote areas have greater access and opportunities to learn due to the increase of online learning programs offered by post-secondary institutions. Post-secondary education institutions have a responsibility to engage in this work *in a good way*, embracing relational ways of teaching, while identifying and challenging the systemic barriers that continue to impact the educational attainment of Indigenous peoples. Otherwise, the potentially positive impacts of skills training will be lessened for Indigenous learners. These learners will miss out on skill development opportunities that would benefit them, their communities, and society at large.

In this paper, we discussed the critical role that partnership building with Indigenous Nations/organizations plays in strengthening cultural learning within educational settings. These collaborative efforts foster a deeper appreciation and understanding of diversity and culture.



Faculty development emerges as a pivotal factor in this process, particularly equipping non-Indigenous instructors with the skills and knowledge required to respectfully engage with Indigenous Knowledge Systems, promote equity, and foster inclusive environments when teaching online. Finally, the integration of relational pedagogies and the implementation of the Four Movements Rubric can help educators move beyond the customary metrics and embrace the holistic nature of the learning process.

Ottman (2017) posits, “the changes that emerge from a constructive collaboration whose aim is to impact Indigenous education positively, will benefit education and humanity as a whole” (p. 112). By recognizing the challenges and opportunities that exist in this work, we can take practical and meaningful steps towards delivering educational programs that can benefit all students, faculty, staff, and society.

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## Appendix A

### Collective Leadership Instructors

I (Valeria) am forever grateful to my colleagues Candice Cook and Russel Johnston. Russ invited me to bring my own cultural teachings into the course. Co-teaching collective leadership in the PPA Program, opened a path to self-love, to affirm and celebrate my cultural identity and to be humble. Candice prompted me to design the rubric. Co-teaching the course with her and working with our cohort was truly an act of love.

## Appendix B

### Aspirations

Dr. Rodríguez de France, who trained the PPA Program instructors, uses the word *aspirations* instead of learning outcomes. Learners in the collective leadership course demonstrated the course's aspirations through their assignments (demonstrations of learning) and used these statements from the Indigenous Wellness Framework (Thunderbird Partnership Foundation, 2020) as a guide.

Mental. I aspire to identify meaning by connecting to knowledge.

Physical. I aspire to have a sense of purpose.

Emotional. I aspire to feel an increased sense of belonging.

Spiritual. I aspire to have a sense of hope.