Teaching Indigenous Content In An Online Environment: An Interview With Two Anishinaabe Instructors

Anita Vaillancourt[1]*, Lana Ray[2], & Denise Baxter[1]

Lakehead University[1]. Athabasca University[2]

Two Anishinaabe post-secondary educators are interviewed about their experience teaching Indigenous content in an online environment for an institution located on Anishinaabe territory. Specifically, they discuss key components of their institution's Indigenous content requirement policy framework regarding content and delivery and discuss insights, uncertainties, and lessons learned to stimulate critical thought rather than provide a prescribed structure or task list for success.

Online learning is gaining renewed interest in higher education because of its capabilities to respond to the expectations and needs of learners who are location-bound due to employment, familial or other responsibilities, needs, and preferences in addition to the new income generation opportunities it affords to post-secondary institutions (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2019). Consequently, the dramatic shift to online learning has created both opportunities and challenges for the design and delivery of Indigenous content within post-secondary education. Although online education has become commonplace in post-secondary institutions, obstacles, particularly for culturally diverse students have also been found (Petersen, 2015 cited in Kumi-Yeboah et al., 2020).

Online learning environments are not neutral spaces (Morford & Ansloos, 2021). Indeed, educational technology platforms and tools embody social, cultural, and political values and biases (Migueliz Valcarlos et al., 2020). The former Special Rapporteur on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, Victoria Tauli Corpuz, asserts that technologies are not mere machines but instead embody social relations that can perpetuate control and dominance through their ability to encourage certain types of interactions and discourage or contain others (as cited in Wemigwans, 2016). The ubiquitous nature of technology can be wrongfully equated as universal. However, technology can function as a modality of westernization and colonization, reproducing the structural inequality [and coloniality] that is already present in the institution and educational experience for Indigenous students (Reedy, 2019).

*Corresponding author − anita.vaillancourt@lakeheadu.ca

Vaillancourt, A. Ray, L., & Baxter, D. (2024). Teaching Indigenous content in an online environment: An interview with two Anishinaabe instructors. *Papers on Postsecondary Learning and Teaching, 7*, 30-37.

Despite the uptick of online learning and the ability of online learning environments to re(inscribe) social relations, to date there has been little dialogue about online learning and Indigenous peoples in Canada (Pulla, 2019), particularly in regard to lacking critical perspectives (Migueliz Valcarlos et al., 2020). Instead, discourse surrounding online learning has predominantly concentrated on the potential to address structural inequities, including expanded access to western education as well as Indigenous culture and language, increased flexibility, and improving participatory learning (Pulla, 2019). In an effort to bring relationality to a digital space, this article explores the implementation of an Indigenous content requirement by a university located on Anishinaabe territory through an interview with two Anishinaabe instructors/professors (D and L) from that institution. The Indigenous Content Requirement Policy Framework development was led by the authors through extensive community engagement and provides oversight on the design and delivery of the Indigenous content requirement (ICR). The interviewer (A), a colleague of the two instructors, explores through conversation, key components of the institution's Indigenous Content Requirement Policy Framework. Focusing on the content and pedagogy pillars of the framework, the conversation continues with a discussion about how the authors sought to privilege anti-oppressive pedagogy and connection to place in their delivery of Indigenous content in an online environment. The conversation offers no specific recommendations but is designed to incite critical thought and conversation.

A: *Chi-miigwetch for having this conversation with me today! To start, would each of you please introduce yourself.*

D: Of Course! Boozhoo. Denise Baxter nindizhnikaaz. Mukwa n'dodem, Marten Falls nindoonjibaa. I have been a sessional instructor who has designed and taught Indigenous content courses that meet the Indigenous content requirement for the past three years. These courses have focused on the introductory course to the discipline, housing, gender and government utilising both Indigenous pedagogies and western pedagogies. I am also a university administrator and prior to entering post-secondary education I worked in the K-12 sector for twenty-five years as a teacher and principal. I was also the co-chair of the ICRTF from which the Indigenous content policy framework was developed and also developed the online courses in synchronous, asynchronous and hybrid modes for delivery of the Indigenous content courses using a D2L platform.

L: Boozhoo! Lana Ray nindizhnikaaz. Waaskone Giizhigook niintigo, Oshowkinoozhe n'dodem, Opwaaganasiniing nindoonjibaa. I am a tenured professor and I have taught Indigenous content courses that meet the Indigenous content requirement for the past six years. The courses have been synchronous and asynchronous in the areas of Indigenous health, storytelling, community development and decolonization using the D2L Learning Platform. I was tasked with creating the first online courses for the Indigenous Learning department and I am currently developing a

mandatory equity, diversity and social justice course for the School of Nursing. I also worked alongside Denise as the co-Chair of the Indigenous Content Requirement Taskforce.

A: *Miigwetch. Before we delve into course design and implementation would you tell me about the Indigenous Content Requirement Framework?*

D: Absolutely. Lakehead University became the first university in Canada to implement a mandatory ICR, with all undergraduate degree programs containing a degree requirement of one, 36-hour course of "Indigenous content" beginning September 2016. Subsequently, in 2020, a Task Force of the Provost and Vice-President Academic was struck with a mandate to develop a framework to review and support ICR quality improvement - much had happened since the ICR was first implemented, including the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions' Final Report (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015). The main output of this taskforce was the development of the Policy Framework which was developed through engagement with forty-five individuals, including Indigenous and non-Indigenous faculty with expertise in Indigenization, decolonization and reconciliation, relevant administration and academic committees, Indigenous students, and members of the Indigenous community. The Indigenous community included members of the Ogimaawin Indigenous Education Council (OIEC) who are responsible for providing advice on Indigenous education to the President of the University and additional people from the broader community.

The framework outlines five essential areas for ICR design and delivery: 1) Curriculum content and delivery; 2) Institutional support and commitment; 3) Decolonizing policy and practice; 4) Indigenous authority; e) Decision making; and 5) Centering Indigenous peoples (Lakehead University, 2023). The area, 'Centering Indigenous peoples' which underpins all other areas ensures that Indigenous communities, students, faculty, and staff are central to every decision and touchpoint related to the ICR. This process was installed to ensure that this settler education is not occurring to the detriment of Indigenous peoples.

A: *Now, when you refer to Indigenous content what exactly do you mean?*

L: Yeah, that is a great question and one that we had to work through as well! The inaugural Indigenous content requirement required students to demonstrate that they had met at least one of seven learning outcomes that ranged from Indigenous knowledges and worldviews to community engagement and reconciliation to the impacts of colonialism and racism to community wellbeing, relationships with land, rights and Indigenous histories related to Indigenous peoples around the globe (Lakehead University, 2015). These outcomes weren't scaffolded or approached in a relational way, at least not from an institutional perspective. The ICR Policy Framework provides much more structure and guidance in regard to what is meant by Indigenous content. It is specific to local Indigenous peoples - nationally and regionally and "requires graduates to possess knowledge, skills and competencies regarding the historical and ongoing processes of settler colonialism and anti-Indigenous racism through critical and culturally safe

pedagogies" (Lakehead University, 2023, p. 14). This focus does not preclude the inclusion of other types of knowledges for students' learning. Instead, it is strategic in that students must have a foundation in key content areas to ensure that Indigenous Peoples and knowledges are not fetishized, disrespected, appropriated, and traumatized in the learning process. There is an emphasis on national and regional Indigenous content that is taught through anti-oppressive pedagogies that encourage critical thinking, relationality and responsibility (Lakehead University, 2023). In doing so, much of the gaze is placed on settlers in situ to Indigenous peoples in the territories they occupy as opposed to learning solely about Indigenous peoples and cultures.

A: *When you first learned that you were teaching online, what was your initial reaction? Did you have any concerns? For example, because Indigenous pedagogies were not originally intended for online environments, there are concerns about how it can discount centrality of place (Huguenin, n.d.) and undermine and undervalue Indigenous ways of knowing (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2019).*

L**:** There was one course in particular that got transferred to online due to Covid-19 and I thought to myself, "what am I going to do"! The course was on Indigenous storytelling which met the original learning outcomes. When I taught the course in person, there were components on the land, with relational and community building components-like sharing circles and sharing food, and interactions with community and Elders. The first year I taught it online, I made the decision to completely revise the content into a service-learning course where we focused less on cultural stories and more so on personal narratives. I just didn't feel like I could design something that would be respectful in the time provided and I had concerns about accessing cultural knowledge without having to even step foot in the territory of the peoples whose culture it is. The course received mixed reviews and some students were very resistant because they had expectations around cultural content. The second time I taught the course online, I kept the service-learning component but changed it to the class supporting the planning of an online water day event that featured local knowledge holders telling stories of the land from my community and two neighbouring communities. We spent a lot of time discussing the distinction between this and expectations of cultural knowledge and how to engage with Indigenous communities and knowledges respectfully.

D: Creating learning spaces that centre Indigenous pedagogies was a key aspect of creating a learning community in a virtual environment (Zoom). When designing and implementing a synchronous class which occurred during the pandemic, I decided to utilize circle pedagogy to begin and close the classes. We began each class with a circle to ground our minds and spirits to the group for the duration of time we spent together. Usually, the focus on the first circle was to build relationships with each other and gain an understanding of our individual circumstances (Graveline, 1998). By building these relationships with each other at the beginning of class, we learned about the strengths and circumstances of each member of our community circle; this

allowed us to delve deeper into dialogue and critical discourse during the class while being kind to each other. Following the lecture and class dialogue activity, we closed with a reflection circle on our learning for the class. Student feedback to this process of holding a virtual classroom was very positive as they built relationships with each other across physical communities, particularly during the pandemic.

A: *And what about anti-oppressive pedagogy? By this I mean centering marginalized experiences and having critical reflection and dialogue to dismantle power relations (Freire, 1970/2000; hooks, 1994; Migueliz Valcarlos et al., 2020). For example, one of the critiques of online learning is that it gives the perception that institutions are both flexible and student-centered yet, flexibility conjures the image of a self-reliant and individualistic learner - an image and reality that many learners do not meet (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2019). For example, a study by Reedy and colleagues (2019) found that Indigenous students experience negative interactions with classmates and want more connections with other Indigenous students (Reedy, 2019). Have you seen this or adjusted in your course design to purposefully address any of these barriers?*

D: I set up my courses to provide opportunities to build a learning community. Having solid relationships with each other in our learning communities is very important to have an environment where students can build trust with each other and with me. When students have positive relationships and interactions with each other, it creates a more positive learning environment. I also make it a point to get to know the learning strengths and needs of the learners. I make sure that I use differentiated output on assignments so students can demonstrate their learning of the content in the manner that utilizes their strengths. Anishinaabe mastery is critical to many of the things we learn to do with our Elders and knowledge keepers. In keeping with this, I offer students the ability to resubmit their assignments after receiving feedback if they wish to improve their work.

A: *What you are describing sounds like what is termed "radical flexibility" in the literature (Houlden & Veletsianos, 2019, p. 10) but I understand it to really be just day to day practice in Anishinaabe pedagogy! Lana, is there anything you would like to add about anti-oppressive pedagogy?*

L: I was teaching an Indigenous community course in the fall semester. The course delved into some very complex issues related to resource development, ongoing colonization and Indigenous self-determination. I went back and forth on whether or not to include discussion posts because I was concerned that I would not have the capacity to continuously monitor the posts to ensure that racist or other forms of problematic comments were posted. If something like that happened in the in-person classroom, I could address it on the spot and instantly follow up with Indigenous students as needed. However, this was not possible in an online format. In some ways, it felt counter-intuitive to an anti-oppressive approach in the sense that I was actively containing the opportunities for group dialogue and exchange; however, the potential for acts of racism in the

virtual environment was just not a risk I was willing to take. In subsequent years of teaching the course online, I adapted my practice. I created opportunities for engagement in ways that supported building community and making connections. This was aligned with Migueliz Valcarlos and colleagues' (2020) call for discussion boards as places for students to challenge hegemony and build upon their personal epistemologies. For example, in a unit on water and community development, students were required to identify local bodies of water, how they were used and how this impacted local First Nations. Through these posts, students could engage with each other, and understand how the course content informed learning about issues experienced in their local context. The posts also enabled students to exercise critical reflection and epistemological growth centered around understanding and identifying hegemony while refraining from analyzing Indigenous peoples.

A: *These examples you are providing are excellent. It is so essential to address course design and teaching from an anti-oppressive lens so that online learning does not become a mechanism to uphold the persona of the benevolent institution (Tuck & Yang, 2012) at the expense of Indigenous students. While significant challenges in Indigenous content for online environments exist, there are also many opportunities to do things better and you have given us some great insights and tangible examples for us to do this work! One of my main takeaways from our conversation today was that technological advances remain a tool to "do the work" and do not overshadow the continuing need for culturally relevant modalities.*

Conclusion

As highlighted throughout the discussion featured in this article, providing Indigenous content in a manner that demonstrates deep respect for local and regional Indigenous knowledges and cultures, and upholds Indigenous pedagogical principles demands a substantive awareness and understanding of how colonialism, anti-Indigenous racism, and white supremacy manifest, intersect, and collectively operate within western society and its education system. It follows that teaching Indigenous content online involves privileging Indigenous worldviews, principles, and practices from the point of curriculum design to implementation and evaluation. The Anishinaabe educators interviewed in this article embraced developing communities of learning that emphasize inclusion, relationship development, connection to place, mutual respect, and reciprocity while fostering critical reflection as essential components of teaching Indigenous content online from an Anishinaabe perspective. Actively exercising a deep commitment to recognizing and mitigating colonial biases inherent within online education technologies and platforms was also deemed a critical aspect of effectively teaching Indigenous content in virtual environments. Accordingly, understanding appropriate applications and roles of technology for these teachings requires regarding technology as a tool or platform for teaching and learning rather than positioning it as a central means for educating.

As learned through the development of the ICR framework at Lakehead University and through the experiences of the Anishinaabe educators interviewed in this article, improving

Indigenous content learning outcomes involves a sustained commitment and a scaffolded teaching process. It also necessitates an environment that recognizes and values the unique and central contributions of Indigenous educators. Developing strong partnerships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous academics, staff, administrators, and students as well as with local Indigenous communities is also imperative (Flavell et al., 2013). In addition, because teaching Indigenous content requires specialized knowledges and skills (see Flavell et al., 2013), the provision of appropriate learning opportunities and resources to adequately support the development of post-secondary educators is also necessary. While such support is critical, particularly in light of the need for “considerable staff development” among non-Indigenous academics and administrators to develop Indigenous cultural competency (Flavell et al., 2013, p.52), it is also essential to ensure adequate support to Indigenous educators who navigate often conflicting perspectives of western and Indigenous worldviews and knowledge systems (see Little Bear, 2000).

In closing, while considerable efforts to incorporate Indigenous content are underway in many post-secondary institutions, these initiatives can further benefit from building and nurturing collaborative partnerships with Indigenous communities, fostering an environment of mutual respect, support, and knowledge sharing among educators, providing sufficient resources to develop the capacity of educators and, appropriately supporting the design and delivery needs of Indigenous educators. This involves respectful and meaningful recognition of the knowledges and expertise carried by Indigenous educators while ensuring their implementation needs are acknowledged, validated, and supported.

References

Flavell, H., Thackrah, R., & Hoffman, J. (2013). Developing Indigenous cultural competence: A model for implementing Indigenous content into the curricula. *Journal of Teaching and Learning for Graduate Employability,* 4(1), 39-63.

Graveline, F. J. (1998). *Circle works: Transforming Eurocentric consciousness.* Fernwood Publishing.

Houlden, S. & Veletsianos, G. (2019). A posthumanist critique of flexible online learning and its “anytime anyplace” claims. *British Journal of Education Technology,* 50(3), 1005-1018.

Huguenin, M. (n.d.). *Integrating Indigenous Pedagogy in Remote Courses*. Teaching and Learning. Retrieved July 25, 2023, from https://www.trentu.ca/teaching/integrating-indigenous-pedagogy-remote-courses

Little Bear, L. (2000). *Jagged Worldviews Colliding*. In M.A. Battiste (Ed.), Reclaiming Indigenous Voice and vision (pp. 77–85). UBC Press.

Kumi-Yeboah, A., Dogbey, J., Yuan, G., & Smith, P. (2020). Cultural diversity in online education: An exploration of instructors’ perceptions and challenges. *Teachers College Record,* 122, 1-46.

Lakehead University. (2015). Learner Outcome Assessment Matrix (LOAM). https://www.lakeheadu.ca/sites/default/files/uploads/22/Item%2010.1%20-%20Evaluation%20Process%20for%20ICR_2015_03_06.pdf

Lakehead University. (2023). Indigenous Content Requirement Policy Framework. https://drive.google.com/file/d/1RsOlFzd2U0-0D46n56qKh3wnxFY9ViV5/view

Migueliz Valcarlos, M., Wolgemuth, J.R., Haraf, S., & Fisk, N. (2020). Anti-oppressive pedagogies in online learning: A critical review. *Distance Education,* 41(3), 345-360.

Morford, A., & Ansloos, H. (2021). Indigenous sovereignty in digital territory: A qualitative study on land-based relations with #NativeTwitter. *AlterNative,* 17(2), 293-305.

Pulla, S. (2019). Mobile learning and Indigenous Education in Canada: A synthesis of new ways of learning. In, Information Resource Management Association (Editor), *Indigenous Studies: Breakthroughs in Research and Practice,* 2, 175-199.

Reedy, A. K. (2019). Rethinking online learning design to enhance the experiences of Indigenous higher education students. *Australasian Journal of Educational Technology*, *35*(6), 132–149. https://doi.org/10.14742/ajet.5561

Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. (2015). Canada's residential schools: Missing children and unmarked burials (Vol. 4). McGill-Queen's University Press.

Tuck, E., & Yang, K. W. (2012). Decolonization is not a metaphor. *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society,* 1(1), 1-40.

Wemigwans, J. (2016*). A Digital Bundle: Exploring the impact of Indigenous Knowledge online through Four Directions Teachings*. Unpublished Doctoral Dissertation. OISE, University of Toronto.