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Stumbling through: Building and creating space for non-Indigenous decolonization from a non-Indigenous perspective

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Abstract: This paper explores the necessity of building educational space for non-Indigenous people to begin to stumble through dialogue around decolonization and Reconciliation from a non-Indigenous perspective.

Keywords: decolonization; critical hope; adult educators; non-Indigenous perspective

This paper synthesizes a project in which the purpose was to create, utilizing the latest theoretical frameworks and pedagogical approaches, safe and transformative space where non-Indigenous people can begin to stumble through controversial topics related to decolonization and Reconciliation. The impetus of this project stems from the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation *Calls for Action* (2015), which advocates for Reconciliation work to be funded, researched and implemented for non-Indigenous peoples. There is a noticeable gap in the field of adult education around decolonization and Reconciliation from a non-Indigenous perspective. Although this topic has gained traction in recent years, Indigenous researchers, authors, and facilitators are still carrying the burden of work when it comes to decolonization education among non-Indigenous people, particularly in the field of adult education. The research and synthesis of theories and frameworks positioned and presented in this paper are an attempt to begin to fill the aforementioned gap.

Much of the theory upon which this research is built lies in the field of adult education. Clover et al. (2013), Visano & Jakubowski (2002), and Regan (2010) built on Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (2000) and *Pedagogy of Hope* (2014). Schenck and Cruickshank (2015) build upon Kolb's (1984) work on experiential learning. Although the theories utilized in this research are present in adult education, applying a decolonization and Reconciliation lens from a non-Indigenous, for non-Indigenous, perspective is unique and much needed.

Introduction

The context of this project and this project is thoughtfully and deliberately placed within the non-Indigenous community. As such, this project is designed and positioned as an introductory into the process of decolonization. The intention is to speak only from a non-Indigenous perspective and acknowledge that Indigenous stories, perspectives and methodologies, though vitally important to the process of Reconciliation, are largely beyond the scope and perspective of an introductory by-settler, for-settler project. Although there are pieces of work included within this project by Indigenous scholars, the work included has been carefully selected where the authors were speaking to and about non-Indigenous communities, in an attempt to acknowledge, honor and respect the fact that Indigenous stories and perspectives are not ours to share.

In order to move forward towards Reconciliation, the non-Indigenous population must start/move along the path of decolonization. Non-Indigenous people need to understand that assimilation tactics and colonial thinking are not past tense. As Lowman & Baker (2015) state, "there is a large and growing body of literature that reveals the ongoing and overwhelming

impact of colonial ideologies at work” (p. 6). Colonial ideologies are held up by institutions, culture and pervading societal myths. Part of the colonial ideology that impedes Reconciliation is the prevalence of the ‘us versus them’ dichotomous paradigm within Western-Indigenous relations (Ferrara, 2015, p. 1).

As such, there is a need to rebuild and shift the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples. Lowman & Barker (2015) speak of how non-Indigenous people are simultaneously blind to how colonial ideologies target Indigenous persons and continue to define the lives of individuals. As Ferrara (2015) so eloquently states, part of correcting this blindness requires the non-Indigenous population to demystify Indigenous stereotypes and learn from each other through dialogic exchange. Those who wish to be Indigenous allies, or even to speak about Western-Indigenous relations, have very limited access to safe space with other non-Indigenous people where they can link critical reflection with social action through dialogic exchange (Regan, 2010).

The void this work is attempting to fill is both practical and theoretical. Theoretically, there is little academic literature about non-Indigenous decolonization work by non-Indigenous scholars. Critical race theorist Christopher Dunbar (2014) utilizes anti-racist research to highlight the necessity of such a perspective. Dunbar posits that there are facts that are best disseminated when the facilitator/educator and participants have shared experiences. For Dunbar (2014), “there exist other intangibles/nuances that are best transmitted and understood when shared experiences, epistemologies, and the relationship to both are evident” (p. 92). Non-Indigenous adult educators must move into the uncertain waters of decolonization and begin to create space for these courageous conversations if there is going to be tangible progress towards Reconciliation.

More practically, space must be made for non-Indigenous people to have open, honest, safe and challenging conversations, informed by theory and pedagogy, if incredibly complex and intersectional topics like decolonization and Reconciliation are to be addressed in a meaningful way. Although there may be grass-roots programs implementing these approaches, they are few, far between, and do not have the benefit of being influenced by research and theory. This project aims to bring together theory and practice by attempting to apply concepts and theories of adult education in a practical community-based format in order to aid in the process of decolonization for non-Indigenous people.

Theoretical Approach

The conceptual framework for this project is based largely on the work of Paulette Regan (2010) in her book *Unsettling the Settler Within*. Regan’s (2010) pedagogy of critical hope, heavily influenced by Paulo Freire and Daniel Schugurensky, posits that “education is not simply about the transfer of knowledge, but it is a transformative experiential learning that empowers people to make changes in the world” (p. 23). Simple knowledge transfer and critical self reflection can lead people into a state of pessimism, apathy and paralysis, further exasperating the obstacles to effective progress towards decolonization (Regan, 2010, p. 23). Therefore, Regan (2010) argues that critical reflection and social action must be linked to allow non-Indigenous people to avoid the pit of paralysis or righteous defiance through an understanding that “though we cannot change the past, neither are we held prisoner by it” (p.23). Such critical reflection can often demand that we, as non-Indigenous people, question the culture narratives and myths taught to us, often illiciting feelings of unease and uncertainty.

Because non-Indigenous decolonization work inherently raises issues of uncertainty, theoretical approaches to the unease or uncertainty that comes with decolonizing oneself must be utilized. Dealing with uncertainty in the context of non-Indigenous decolonization is a topic explored in depth by Eva Mackey (2016). Like Regan, Mackey (2016) argues that non-Indigenous people must participate in the process of decolonization in real ways, arguing that epistemological shifts are needed within non-Indigenous communities to rebuild relationships between non-Indigenous and Indigenous people (p. 12). Mackey states that serious structural, economic and political changes must happen in order for countries to truly begin to decolonize, and the start of that journey begins with fundamental shifts in non-Indigenous perspectives (Mackey, 2016, p. 133). Shifting non-Indigenous perspectives is a way to “move beyond the traps and limitations of ongoing settler colonialism, in order to learn new ways of building relations of *both* autonomy and interconnection with our Indigenous neighbors” (Mackey, 2016, p. 12).

Mackey’s work on embracing forms of critical uncertainty supplements Regan’s pedagogy of critical hope beautifully. Utilizing examples of Treaty and land claims, Mackey argues that “many of the foundations of settler identities and practices need to be unsettled so that we can learn to live with, and even embrace, the uncertainty that is necessary in order to learn how to imagine and build decolonized relationships” (Mackey, 2016, p. 132). Similar to Regan, Mackey speaks to the need of creative elements in decolonization which are rooted in land claims, treaty rights and legal proceedings. Mackey’s work is useful in framing and contextualizing creative uncertainty within the decolonizing process.

Practical Approach

Regan’s framework of linking critical reflection and social action with Mackey’s (2016) theoretical approach to dealing with non-Indigenous uncertainty around decolonization and Reconciliation is complimented by Livy Visano and Lisa Jakubowski’s book *Teaching Controversy* (2002). Visano & Jakubowski (2002) put forward a pedagogical approach rooted in transformative experiential learning, critical consciousness and holistic methodologies which enrich and supplement Regan’s (2010) approach to teaching decolonization by linking “reason and emotion” (p. 13).

Utilizing Visano & Jakubowski’s (2002) pedagogy, decolonizing spaces in community contain three fluid and dynamic phases of education: Experience and reflection, structured reflection and dialogue, and action. Participants are invited to share their experiential insights relating to decolonization and reflect upon their experience, assumptions and myths, in which the group participates in inquiry-based dialogue. Participants will then creatively represent their reflection/assumptions and experiences, speaking in small groups and as a whole about what they are discovering about themselves, others and about their country in relation to decolonization (Visano and Jakubowski, 2002). Finally, participants are invited to link their learning with the community by actively engaging in their decolonizing journey. The goal of utilizing a decolonizing pedagogical methodology is to use emotional commonalities to actively engage participants in their learning and decolonization. In turn, this can provide participants the opportunity to raise their critical consciousness (Visano and Jakubowski, 2002).

The structural format and sequence of the workshop components is informed by the research of Schenck and Cruickshank (2015), who effectively re-conceptualized experiential learning by weaving effective education practices, like Kolb’s (1984) learning cycle, with cognitive neuroscience into “a self-adjusting fractal-like cycle” called the Co-Constructed

Developmental Teaching Theory (CDTT) (p. 73). By utilizing CDTT, participants will be able to move through a learning cycle, centered around decolonization, that utilizes the biology of the learning process, or a “neurobiologically supported sequence” (p. 73). CDTT “conceptualizes the learner holistically and seeks to meet them where they are, whatever their background, where variability is the norm” (Shenck & Cruickshank, 2015, p. 85). By incorporating elements of the conscious (front end) and non-conscious (back-end) processes of learning, CDTT frames the learning event through activities, debriefing, bridge-building and assimilation, in which “significant breaks” or pauses are incorporated in between to allow the brain to move through the learning process (Shenck & Cruickshank, 2015). Utilized as a teaching process, CDTT “can uncover processes that are ubiquitous to learning” (Shenck & Cruickshank, 2015, p. 89).

In contrast to many models of experiential learning, CDTT allows for empirical testing, as “each phase is specifically defined and described in terms of quantifiable cognitive psychological and neurobiological processes” (Shenck & Cruickshank, 2015, p. 90). When one considers the sheer number of non-Indigenous people that require decolonization over the next century, utilizing a process that is participant centred, adaptable, self-adjusting, and holistic with the benefit of providing empirical feedback is vital. As non-Indigenous educators move into the field of decolonizing education, projects which take on decolonization work in a process that gathers empirical data will benefit future educators by discovering what theories/pedagogies/processes are most effective in facilitating the intersectional and complex topic of decolonization.

Decolonizing Workshops, Drop-ins & More

Utilizing the aforementioned pedagogical and structural approaches, the project itself contains elements of workshop design by Clover et al. (2013) as well as ongoing ‘drop-ins’, where participants are invited to show up every 1-3 weeks to continue the decolonizing learning process. A topic as complex and intricate as decolonization is not one that can be tackled in a single event. Further, by following the CDTT process there must be periods of ‘pause’ in-between deep moments of learning. Therefore, any project using the aforementioned frameworks and processes must be ongoing to some extent. However, there needs to be significant framing at the beginning of the decolonizing process and as such, an issue-based workshop provides an ideal method. The use of an issue-based workshop, according to Clover, Jayme, Hall and Follen (2013), revolves around a specific issue, allowing participants the ability to view issues from various standpoints, use settings in the community to enhance learning, create space where participants can take risks and challenge/reflect on assumptions, as well as collectively develop plans for action (Clover et al., 2013).

The introductory workshop aims are to allow participants to understand the concept of decolonization, recognize colonial ideologies that are active and present in our institutions and culture, and frame the conversation in a way that sets decolonization and Reconciliation as the ultimate goal. With the understanding that these are lofty aims, carefully incorporating the theoretical frameworks, pedagogical approaches and processes mentioned above make these aims attainable. By leveraging the advantages of multiple theories, frameworks and processes, with the addition of an educator who has worked on their own decolonization, the initial decolonization workshops highlight the efficacy of this model. Further, allowing for more informal ‘drop-ins’ to supplement and continue the learning of the workshop have been incredibly useful in allowing participants at different stages of learning to continue their decolonization.

It should be noted that the feedback received from the project is able to inform the facilitator, the learner and the content (Schenck & Cruickshank, 2015). Because of the fractal nature of CDTT, this project can adapt and self-adjust. Initial pilot projects have resulted in adjustments every time to improve the learning experience of participants. Further, multiple activities and avenues of dialogue have been created within the parameters of CDTT, with the facilitator deciding which to use once they have spent time with the participants. In essence, the CDTT model allows for the participants to aid in the co-construction of the project. As such, there may be elements added to this project that have not been introduced or thought of yet. When dealing with such complex topics like decolonization, it seems necessary to create space for other ways of knowing/being/learning that the researcher may not have thought on or been introduced to yet.

Initial Feedback. At the time of writing, the decolonizing project mentioned above has only recently been piloted in a community setting in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada and as such, publishing any concrete results or detailed programming would be premature. That being said, the feedback has been incredibly positive. It is the intention of the author to provide further information and analysis of the pilot project at the 2019 Adult Education Research Conference (AERC).

Conclusion

Creating a safe transformative space for non-Indigenous people to learn and speak openly about decolonization and Reconciliation is vital. As our society continues to progress, it is imperative that non-Indigenous educators take up topics like decolonization from a non-Indigenous perspective to be able to educate and support fellow non-Indigenous people on their own decolonization journey. Adult educators have often been on the forefront of progressive and radical social change, and we must continue that tradition by moving into uncertain and intimidating areas like decolonization and Reconciliation. As Johnson (2018) eloquently states, “if the goal is to change the world...we need to see and deal with the social roots that generate and nurture the social problems that are reflected in the behavior of individuals” (p. 363). It will be through a process of wide-spread decolonization that individuals and society can begin to understand the social roots of social problems, and non-Indigenous adult educators are a vital part of that process.

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