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A Relational Approach Towards Decolonizing Curriculum Development within the Colonial Postsecondary Institution

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Article abstract

The Canadian academy is dominated by Western epistemologies that devalue Indigenous ways of knowing and marginalize Indigenous communities, cultures, and histories (Louie et al., 2017). This paper draws on a cross-disciplinary, interprofessional collaboration between a School of Public Health Sciences and School of Social Work to develop an online graduate course that sought to advance knowledge and practice in Indigenous wellbeing and health through a social justice lens. We explore key considerations, strategies, and challenges undertaken by an interdisciplinary group of non-Indigenous professors to create a learning experience for students that challenges colonial ways of seeing, being, knowing, and doing in the professional practice fields of public health and social work and that serves to elevate and sustain Indigenous voices, knowledges, sciences, and practices within the academy. In doing so, we centre the process of course development, including working with an Indigenous Advisory Circle and Indigenous contributors of content, guest lecture videos, and artwork. The paper describes the creation of a relational teaching and learning community, while raising concerns about the institutionalization of this approach to Indigenous-focused course development in the absence of the structural changes needed to enhance the presence of Indigenous faculty and Elders in academic institutions.

A Relational Approach Towards Decolonizing Curriculum Development Within The Colonial Postsecondary Institution

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Abstract The Canadian academy is dominated by Western epistemologies that devalue Indigenous ways of knowing and marginalize Indigenous communities, cultures, and histories (Louie et al., 2017). This paper draws on a cross-disciplinary, interprofessional collaboration between a School of Public Health Sciences and School of Social Work to develop an online graduate course that sought to advance knowledge and practice in Indigenous wellbeing and health through a social justice lens. We explore key considerations, strategies, and challenges undertaken by an interdisciplinary group of non-Indigenous professors to create a learning experience for students that challenges colonial ways of seeing, being, knowing, and doing in the professional practice fields of public health and social work and that serves to elevate and sustain Indigenous voices, knowledges, sciences, and practices within the academy. In doing so, we centre the process of course development, including working with an Indigenous Advisory Circle and Indigenous contributorsofcontent, guest lecture videos, and artwork. The paper describes the creation of a relational teaching and learning community, while raising concerns about the institutionalization of this approach to Indigenous-focused course development in the absence of the structural changes needed to enhance the presence of Indigenous faculty and Elders in academic institutions.

KeyWords Indigenous wellbeing, decolonizing pedagogy, Indigenizing curriculum, public health, social work

Russell feeds small pieces of kindling into the tiny flames that release dancing strands of grey and white smoke. We are at the Sacred Fire Site at the Circle of Reflection, located on a university campus where historic academic buildings loom close by: great stone structures that interrupt expanses of green lawn. There are occasional tall and wide trees whose branches sway in the wind on this sunny autumn day. The whine of a circling mowing tractor overwhelms some of our conversation, and we try not to be distracted by the groundskeepers who work close by. This sacred fire begins, Elders Dan and Mary Lou Smoke explain, with a handful of ashes that have come from sacred fire ceremonies across Turtle Island over the past 25 years. As

Dan and Mary Lou open the circle with teachings and song, we sit around the fire that is being tended with such care, and we watch as the flames grow in resilience and strength.

We are at the Sacred Fire Site to debrief a course that we have recently co-developed and co-taught. The course is entitled, *Indigenous Wellbeing, Health, and Social Justice* and was offered to a combined class of social work and public health graduate students at the University of Waterloo in Ontario, Kanata (Canada)[1] for the first time in Spring 2022. It is a collaboration between two social work and two public health professors and between their two academic departments, as well as with an online learning expert, and a community-based Indigenous Advisory Circle (IAC) made up of Elders, scholars, and educators.

As we sit together around the Sacred Fire, we reflect on our collective process of course development through conversation. The conversation became a reflection about academic spaces and the impact of Indigenizing these spaces:

> Elder Dan:"This Sacred Fire Site is an important place. We have been here a number of times for ceremony. It is pretty new and marks a significant recognition by the university here," waving his arm out to the buildings around us.
> Elder Mary Lou, who sits knitting and occasionally flicking her long hair over her shoulder: "Our firekeeper is often part of these ceremonies, and he is also a student here!"
> We exclaim and turn to Russell with questions.
> Russell: "Yes, I want to learn what I need to go out into the world and make a difference. But it really needs to be based on my knowledge, my culture, the teachings that have been given to me by my ancestors."
> Hannah (public health): "This is important. There are many academic spaces that are beginning to think about decolonizing their ways of teaching and knowing, and many other academic processes are being re-examined: student support, admissions, approaches to research and funding, and grading, for example."
> Andrea (social work): "It is about making sure that these efforts are meaningful. So much was learned as we developed this course. We each held such unique spaces in this work, bringing our locations and perspectives to a process that kept disrupting institutional perspectives. Bringing the academic exercise of course development to a collaboration and inviting Indigenous community members into the collaboration had an impact that was hard for me to envision ahead of time."
> Trish (social work): "That was what was so powerful about working closely with the IAC. The academic expectations with regards to expertise, course design, and learning activities were exposed for their colonial roots. Also, white settler superiority was identified and scrutinized in our academic work. It was unsettling, that is for sure."

1 The name, *Canada*, has its origins in the Haudenosaunee word, *Kanata*, which means village or a collection of huts (The Canadian Encyclopedia, 2015).

> Kelly (public health): "Even our meetings with the IAC were unsettling. These weren't meetings with an agenda driven by tasks and demands for productivity. Rather, we were invited to be with one another, to listen to stories, to trust in the unfolding that was going to happen. Our check-ins took so much time, which would not have been tolerated in most of the academic meetings I attend, and yet each meeting was a depth of learning that nourished the course development work."

We begin our paper by locating ourselves in dialogue and engaged in ceremony. Four of us are based in the same academic institution, holding roles in the social work (AD, TVK) and public health (HN, KS) programs that include researcher, educator, curriculum developer, and program director, as well as various ranks: full professor, associate professor, and research chair, and each of these positions describes a particular relationship within and to the colonial structure of the university. Four of us carry white settler identities and histories, including histories of practicing in the professions of social work and public health nutrition. Some of us have longstanding connections with Indigenous communities and community-engaged research that prioritizes relationship building and research ethics that serve to empower and enrich the communities who guide our collaborative research practices. As members of equity-deserving communities (e.g., 2SLGBTQ+), some of us are firmly grounded in community-engaged research practices and processes that prioritize relationships and lived experiences to co-produce community knowledges, through an intersectional lens, towards the overarching goal of social justice and structural transformation. The other three authors are Indigenous, from Ojibway (MLS), Seneca (DS) and Cree and Oneida (KJA) Nations. In their positions as Elders, university instructors, teachers, and artists, they prioritize Indigenous knowledges, cultural understandings, and sovereignty.

Collectively, we are committed to decolonization and, thus,to critique the many colonial systems that we find ourselves immersed in (Schiffer, 2021). As a "pillar of colonialism" (Batz, 2018, p.103), the academic institution, with its colonial research and education practices, is a structure that we aim to critique and disrupt. Included in this process, we challenge the fields of social work and health that normalize Western/Eurocentric ways of knowing, knowledge production, and practice. In their considerations of colonizing processes, Cote-Meek and Moeke-Pickering (2020) pay close attention to the academic institution. They write that, historically, within the institution:

> Indigenous knowledges were effectively debased and devalued. This devaluing of Indigenous Peoples and Indigenous knowledges was an intentional act to disrupt our ways of knowing and ways of being and to sever the transmission to the net generation. There is no doubt that education institutions are still very much colonial institutions with deeply held convictions about what constitutes education, research, and pedagogy (p. xv).

In their considerations of the work of colonization, Michael Yellowbird and colleagues speak specifically to social work and social work education (Yellowbird & Chenault, 1999; Gray, et al., 2016). Yellowbird and Chenault (1999) consider the professional ethics of empowerment and social justice, suggesting that social workers and social work educators need to begin this work by acknowledging their professional accountability in painful legacies of colonial harm. When social workers and social work education begin from such a position of accountability, respect for and validation of Indigenous knowledges and experiences can occur. Social work as a profession is committed to social justice, equity, and the disruption of oppression. However, social work education continues to inadequately address the legacy of trauma that the profession carries in terms of the Doctrine of Discovery and settler colonialism (Hiller, 2016). Land is decentralized from considerations of trauma, injustice, and oppression, as the profession took over the colonizing and dispossessing work of the Indian Agents, assuming responsibilities in in the lives of Indigenous Peoples related to general welfare services, child and family welfare, recreation, and adult education.To this point, Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong (2019) state:

> The profession of social work has become a central player in the settler colonial policies of Canada, adapting and reformulating its role in the ongoing dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their territories through a series of strategic shifts in policy and protocols, including in the most recent shift towards a politics of liberal recognition and reconciliation (p. 442).

Fields of medicine and public health, in the forms of intervention and surveillance, have been utilized as tools of colonization within Indigenous communities (Richardson & Crawford, 2020). These procedures and practices emerged after Indigenous communities suffered waves of infectious diseases brought to Turtle Island from Europe. In this context, Indigenous knowledges and healing practices were brushed aside in favour of western approaches, which were viewed as superior by colonial authorities. Such racist and paternalistic public health approaches diminished Indigenous rights and sovereignty (Richardson & Crawford, 2020). Health disparities that continue to exist for Indigenous Peoples within Canada are a direct outcome of colonization and the complicity of healthcare systems in medical colonialism, which have disrupted Indigenous Peoples' ways of knowing and being through the imposition of Eurocentric perspectives on health (Pilarinos et al., 2023).

Practitioners and educators in social work and public health, through many calls to action and justice in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC)'s Calls to action (2015), in reclaiming power and place: The final report of the national inquiry into missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls (2019), and elsewhere, are called upon to rehistoricize or revisit the colonial history complicity of social work and public health's complicity in colonial violence. Doing so, serves to support the repatriation of Indigenous lands, children, culture, and sovereignty; deinstitutionalize through mutual aid, participatory practice, and a commitment to treaty responsibilities; and deprofessionalize by restructuring social work practices back into communities (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, 2019). Calls 1(iii) and 1(iv)

of the TRC's Calls to Action (2015) are responses to the field of social work's complicity and complacency with respect to the violence done to Indigenous Peoples through the residential school system and 60s scoop (Fortier & Hon-Sing Wong, (2019). Collectively, these two items call for social worker education, specifically related to the child welfare system, that promotes social workers' understanding of the "history and impacts of residential schools" and that promotes Indigenous sovereignty over "solutions to family healing" (TRC, 2015, p. 1). The Calls to Action also include several items that aim to establish competencies on Indigenous health and to address anti-Indigenous racism (TRC, 2015). Calls 18 and 19 make reference to the field of public health as having both an "explicit and implicit role in recognizing and addressing the colonial roots of health inequities" (Castleden et al., 2022; p. 213). Institutional and systemic change within the post-secondary public health education system, as well as within Canada's healthcare system, is therefore required, and could be accomplished by focusing less on deficit-based narratives when it comes to Indigenous health and instead highlighting areas of strength in health, healing and wellbeing (Castleden et al., 2022).

Cote-Meek (2018) has described the wholistic transformation that needs to happen in academic institutions, so that their ways of being, doing, and working change from within. It is a transformation process that begins with community engagement, where the knowledges and experience of Indigenous people are meaningfully engaged. The transformation process also entails relationship building, whereby relationships are built with patience and respect, in such a way as to build sustainable trust. Finally, transformation must include action. In the spirit of wholistic transformation, this paper describes the process of co-developing and co-teaching a cross-disciplinary, interprofessional course about Indigenous wellbeing, health, and social justice, anchored firmly in the transformative aims described above. We share the learning that occurred for us as we immersed ourselves in an effort to Indigenize and decolonize the process of course design and content, our pedagogical approaches, and the systems that needed to be activated/de-activated throughout the development of the course. We share the major insights of our work, insights about relationship building as central to Indigenizing and decolonizing practices. This is in line with descriptions by Shawn Wilson (2008) who describes scholarship as 'self in relationship'. Wilson describes the rigorous and critical consciousness that is required for the necessary white/settler decentering to occur. Decentering is a displacement of a person from their central and dominant position or role, thus clearing space to privilege Indigenous voices. We also explore our commitment to a strong coherence between decolonizing and social justice intentions as well as the culture of the virtual teaching and learning space.

Building foundational relationships

As co-developers of the course, we began our work in dialogue, building connections to one another and articulating our first disruption of the course development process: the intention to honour the process of course development rather than to focus primarily on the outcome. We found our inspiration in the resistance to the question of settler futurity: decolonization is not about settler futurity or a final destination for settlers, but rather it is about the "next now" of Indigenous sovereignty (Smith et al., 2018, p. 8). Settler futurity, settlers inserting

themselves into a linear state of permanent presence and superiority, is what occurs through structures of replacement, where the displacement of Indigenous knowledges, lands, ways of being and doing are displaced and then replaced by a "white subject whose manifest destiny is to take the place of the savage" (Tuck & Gaztambide-Fernández, 2013, p. 75). A focus on process requires an ongoing attention to relationships (Tuck & Yang, 2013; Lindstrom, 2022), as well as an accompanying question: who needs to be a part of the network of relationships that we are building? The collaborative approach to writing this paper, with an insistence on the equal value of each author's contributions, represents the relationship building that was our process.

We also began with a commitment to build connections with an Indigenous Advisory Circle (IAC). As a colonial structure, our university reflects the state of almost all universities on Turtle Island, where the employment and retention of Indigenous faculty is low (Henry et al., 2018). Even with institutional and province-wide priorities on hiring Indigenous faculty, albeit still with significant underrepresentation in social work and health programs (uWaterloo, 2020), there are no tenure-track Indigenous faculty in either program, therefore, no available Indigenous faculty who would be equitably compensated by the academic institution for the work of developing the course. We needed, instead, to build connections with Indigenous knowledge holders engaged in the work needed to Indigenize and decolonize social work and public health education and practice to guide the course development. Smith (2018) describes the significant changes that have occurred since she first wrote her critique of postsecondary education and research (1999), noting that there are now communities of Indigenous knowledge holders "who have deepened understandings of the work of decolonizing education and, importantly, created new approaches to education that theorize, revitalize, enhance, and produce Indigenous educational experiences that support Indigenous futures" (p. 6). We aimed to support the development of a course that would recognize/witness and center Indigenous ways of knowing, doing, wellbeing, and social justice, as opposed to maintaining colonial superiority accompanied by a logic of extractive engagement (Batz, 2020).

As colleagues embarking on this opportunity to develop a course centred on concepts of wellness, health, and social justice for Indigenous Peoples within Kanata, our intention from the start was to incorporate Indigenous knowledges as content throughout the course. Conceptualizing the course from the outside involved stepping away from our disciplinary roots in social work and public health to include Indigenous voices. Elders Dan and Mary Lou Smoke, activists and respected community and postsecondary educators, including as adjunct professors at the Schulich School of Medicine and Dentistry in a public health program and the Department of Indigenous Studies at Western University (Canada),were initially invited to open our growing circle to Indigenous wellness and health and social work academics and practitioners primarily living and working within the Territory of the Chonnoton, Anishinaabeg, and Haudenosaunee Peoples where the university is located. Even though the course was being designed as a distance course, we made the collective decision to situate the IAC within the Territory. We connected with Indigenous community members and leaders who had been actively developing ideas and actions about change, reconciliation, and decolonization within

academic institutions broadly, and in relation to postsecondary curricula specifically. As well, we connected with those engaged with decolonizing and Indigenous practices in community-based support, wellbeing, and health services. They included Indigenous social workers from Conestoga College (Kitchener, Ontario) and a local Indigenous agency, White Owl Native Ancestry Association (WONAA) (Kitchener, Ontario), as well as a public health administrator from Six Nations of the Grand River and a non-binary Indigenous educator at Centennial College (Toronto, Ontario). We invited these community members to provide guidance to us in the form of a Circle, after negotiating with several systems across the university to garner appropriate compensation for their contributions.

Inviting Indigenous Advisors to support our collective learning brought into being the responsibility to build and develop not only the course, but also reciprocal and meaningful relationships. Relationships, respect, and reciprocity are important values shared across Indigenous communities and environments (Miltenburg et al., 2022). Throughout this process we were committed to applying the principles of respect, reciprocity, and responsibility within and throughout this relational work to facilitate connection and exchange in shaping and interacting with the content and process of the relational context (Archibald, 2008).

Centring Indigenous voice, knowing, and doing in course content

As described above, one of our first actions to centre Indigenous voice, knowing, and doing in the course was the creation of the IAC. Our formal invitation to the IAC included a plan to have six virtual engagement sessions over the first eight to ten months of the course development schedule. We note that while we would have preferred to meet with the IAC in-person,restrictions related to the COVID-19 pandemic required us to meet virtually throughout the course development process.The exception was the recording of the opening ceremony and the closing ceremony with Elders Dan and Mary Lou, which were completed in-person on a nearby university campus. While not ideal, virtual meetings did support the participation of IAC members who lived further away from the university and/or who were limited in time because of community commitments.

During our first virtual meeting with the IAC, we planned for introductions, with the bulk of the meeting time focused on "important" topics such as responsibilities and resources, processes for sharing knowledge, brainstorming possible course content, and authorship of course content. Ours was a very ambitious"agenda" that prioritized tasks and productivity that reflected and served (our) institutional interests over relationship building and relations. And, importantly, that reflected the colonial and neoliberal norms, logics, and power relations that structure academic institutions. That is, we inadvertently prioritized time and resource efficiencies and linear and transactional processes, for example,as characteristic of the business model adopted by neoliberal academic institutions (Brunette-Debassigne, 2022). The insidious nature of colonial and neoliberal logic within academic institutions worked to subvert our intention to honour the process of course development. During this first meeting and in response to our agenda, IAC members implicitly and respectfully guided us towards a collectivist and relational process (Brunette-Debassigne, 2022) of introducing ourselves and getting to know

each other, a process that continued in subsequent meetings. This was a critically necessary intervention of sorts: a philosophical realignment needed to begin and sustain relationship and trust building throughout the course development process. Moving forward, we abandoned the initial timeline of the IAC engagement sessions, giving way to an organic, circular, iterative, and conversational process of exploring course content and related considerations.

Outside of meeting with the IAC, we met weekly with an Online Learning Consultant from the university's Center for Extended Learning (CEL) to work through draft course content. We used this time as opportunity for collective reflection on the IAC's insights and dialogues, as well as to honour, build upon, and translate our learning from the IAC into overarching goals and learning outcomes for the course, weekly reflection questions for students, content and resources, and assignments. In each case, we endeavoured to centre Indigenous ways of knowing and doing and the presence of Indigenous knowledge keepers in the course. For example, the first overarching goal for the course emphasizes the importance of relationships and relations, drawing on the principles of the Gaswéñdah (Two Row) Wampum Belt (i.e., friendship, peace, respect), rather than the acquisition of what is traditionally viewed as academic knowledge in colonial academic institutions:

> To bring students into a relational (Two Row) teaching and learning community that is social justice-oriented to encourage and support personal transformation towards understanding by experiencing stories of determinants' impacting Indigenous health and wellbeing along with the colonial roots of social and health injustices among Indigenous communities (Daley et al., n.d.).

We replaced the common learning objective statements that are typically presented at the beginning of a week's course content with reflection questions, to invite students to be self-directed in their learning journey rather than being told what they will be learning. For example, a learning objective that conveys to students that they will develop understanding of the differences between Indigenous leadership in the fields of social work and public health in Kanata is (re)written as an invitation for them to consider: "What constitutes Indigenous leadership in the fields of public health and social work within Canada, and how are they similar or dissimilar?" (Daley et al., n.d.). While the differences in the two written statements may be nuanced, we suggest that the former reflects the legacy of the banking concept of teaching (Maylor, 2012) in colonial academic institutions, while the latter is more closely aligned with critical pedagogy (i.e.,critical thinking and critical reflection) (hooks, 1994) as well as with dialogue and co-creation as principles of Indigenous pedagogy (e.g., circle pedagogy) (Barkaskas& Gladwin, 2021). Thus, students were provided with more autonomy with respect to what they learned from the course content. In short, the reflection questions guided students to engage with the course content, rather than telling them what they will learn from the course content. The emphasis of the learning objective is not as much about instructor expectations of students' learning as it is about students' meaningful engagement.

Another practice that we committed to was elevating Indigenous voices, knowledges, sciences, and practices within the academy by only including content, guest lecture videos, and artwork authored and/or co-authored by Indigenous contributors from within Kanata. The content for most weeks includes a guest lecture video by an Indigenous community leader, practitioner, or scholar. For example, in one week an Anishinaabe clinical psychologist speaks to the ways in which colonial structures and anti-Indigenous racism are implicated in Indigenous wellbeing and health,as well as the need for health systems to recognize and integrate Indigenous social determinants of health that centre the critical role of culture and language in collective wellbeing. In another week, a Métis community leader explores how the Land can show us how to be in community. Beyond these guest lecture videos, each week offers other valuable resources authored by Indigenous people to supplement and extend key concepts, ideas, and practices presented in the readings (see Table 1. for a list of weekly topics).

Working with the IAC on questions of resources, speakers, and artists to feature in the course was integral to our commitment to having Indigenous-only content.The consultation process is best characterized as a feedback loop, where we repeatedly circled back to the IAC for their input and affirmation. Through this iterative process, as course content was developed,we were also called to reflect on and rethink elements of the course including its title and description to more accurately represent the content, as well as integrating opening and closing ceremonies performed by Elders.

Table 1. Weekly topics

Week	Topic	Week	Topic
1	Situating Ourselves	7	Colonizing Health Frameworks
2	Locality	8	Experiences with Healthcare and Anti-Indigenous Racism
3	Social Justice and Rights	9	Trauma-Informed Pedagogy
4	Relational Teaching and Learning Community	10	Learning from Land and Community
5	Indigenous Approaches, Values, and Ethics in Health, Wellbeing, and Helping	11	Activism and Growth
6	Pathologizing Indigenous Ways of Knowing and Being	12	Sharing and Closing the Circle

Finally, our practice of creating group and dyad structured assignments that require students to work together to engage Indigenous ways of knowing and doing, with their respective social locations in mind, serves to decentre white/settler perspectives, particularly as they are relevant to the skills and practices of social work and public health.

Collectively, the assignments bring students into a shared space of reflecting on self and professional locations; determinants of wellbeing; performative decolonization and solidarity; the Indigenous concepts of ethical space[2] (Ermine, 2007) and two-eyed seeing[3] (Bartlett, et al., 2012); decolonizing approaches to storytelling (Goodchild, 2021); and contemporary Indigenous activism related to wellbeing and health. Through reflection, students are asked to deeply engage with Indigenous knowledges presented in the course readings, videos, and other resources, in order to challenge colonial ways of seeing, being, knowing, and doing in the professional practice fields of public health and social work and to understand more fully their decolonizing responsibilities.The course culminates with a final independent action-oriented project that asks students to move knowledge into community, underscoring the vital role of action in decolonization, and, as Cote-Meek (2018) states, as required for wholistic transformation.

Importantly, during some of our initial discussions in the Indigenous Advisory Circle, we were asked about our assumptions about the student group. Based on universitywide as well as community health and social work student group profiles, we assumed that most of the students would be settlers. The IAC members reminded us that our course content and learning activities must also be relevant to Indigenous students, as otherwise, we will have created an exclusively settler-centric learning environment. In collaboration with the IAC, we reconsidered the learning material and altered our assignments.

While we prioritized students of social work and community health, we also opened the course to graduate students across the university until the enrollment cap had been reached. There are few courses at the university that focus on Indigenous perspectives. The course has attracted settler students who want to learn more about settler colonialism, Indigenous/settler relations, and how to be in solidarity with Indigenous communities. There have been few Indigenous students in the course, though this is consistent with levels of Indigenous student enrollment at the university in general, as well as in each of the programs that house this course.

Coherence between decolonizing intentions and the culture of the virtual teaching and learning space

As we worked in relationship with the IAC to consider course content that represented and elevated Indigenous ways of knowing and doing in academic institutions, we began to recognize the need to ensure strong coherence between the course's decolonizing and social justice intentions and the culture of the virtual teaching and learning space. By culture, we mean moving beyond the important but limited notion of a supportive and inclusive online environment (Greenan, 2021) towards a virtual learning culture that imagines, encourages, and activates methods of challenging colonial ways of being, knowing, and doing. To this end, we committed to creating a virtual teaching and learning culture that reflected Indigenous ways of

2 Ethical Space is "formed when two societies with disparate worldviews, are poised to engage each other" (Ermine, 2007, p. 193), for example, the space between Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews.

3 Two eyed seeing is a teaching about Indigenous and non Indigenous ways of knowing coming together in positive and supportive ways, each way of knowing is mutually significant and enhancing of the other (Bartlett, et al., 2012).

being, knowing, and doing, to the best extent possible. We integrated Indigenous ceremonies and teachings into course activities and content to give shape to the virtual space; included artistic encounters with Indigenous teachings to deepen students' connections to Indigenous knowledges as well as to improve their critical thinking and reflection skills; and formulated explicit assignment-related practices to engage students in contributing to a relational teaching and learning space.

The virtual teaching and learning space of the course is shaped and anchored by Indigenous opening and closing ceremonies offered by Elders Dan and Mary Lou Smoke. During the opening ceremony, the Elders locate themselves in relation to the land as members of the Seneca Nation-Kildare Clan and Ojibway Nation-Bear Clan, respectively. They share some of the teachings and ceremonies of their Peoples, introducing students to the Dish with One Spoon and Gä-sweńta' (Two Row) Wampum Belts, as friendship and peace treaties that speak to roles and relationships in practices of co-existence between Indigenous Nations as well as among Indigenous Nations and settlers (i.e., relations). The opening ceremony ends with the Elders' drumming and singing; *Anishinaabe Kwe* is sung to honour women as our first teachers. With Elder Mary Lou holding a small copper cup of water, the closing ceremony centres the power of Indigenous women through teachings about their responsibilities to protect the wellbeing of the water and—to speak for the water, for example—raising concern about the negative health effects of water commodification. The closing ceremony ends with drumming and singing as Elder Mary Lou leads the *Water Song*, encouraging students to learn the song, to sing with her, to take the song back to their communities, and to share with them the importance of water as a lifeblood. The video-recordings of the opening and closing ceremonies feature Elders Dan and Mary Lou, along with their ceremonial eagle feathers, braided sweetgrass, bead work, the Dish with One Spoon Wampum Belt and Gä-sweńta' (Two Row) Wampum Belt, drums, tobacco, and a medicine pouch.

Figure 1. The Seed Story (Antone, 2021, December 26)

The 12-week course is also shaped by a Seed Story, inspired by the work of Elder Banakonda Kennedy-Kish (Bell) (2017) and adapted from a model developed by Neufeld and colleagues (2021). In keeping with the Haudenosaunee tradition of the local Territory, the four stages of the Seed Story flow in a counter clockwise direction (Porter, n.d.) guiding students through four inter-related modules: *receiving, connection, compassion,* and *sharing*. In the first stage of the Seed Story, *receiving* (Module 1), students are invited to open themselves to receiving the gift of learning. They are asked to situate themselves in deep connection to the learning that is beginning: to be positive and hopeful. In this stage, the seed is planted. The second stage is time for *connection* (Module 2); for connecting to the learning that is occurring; a time for students and instructors to begin to learn with and from each other through relations and by bringing life experiences, course learning, and course activities together to support the emergence of new ideas and possibilities. *Compassion* (Module 3) follows, with students remaining opening to learning as they are

Figure 2. Compassion (Antone, 2021, September 1)

nurtured to engage more deeply through dialogue and critical reflection. It is a time to ask questions of self and others, to explore, and to engage in a shared community experience of learning. In the final stage, *sharing* (Module 4), students engage in praxis, bringing theories and practices of decolonization together through action. Students learn to participate in activism, using their learning to inspire the transformation of colonial structures, particularly as relevant to the white/settler logic that structures the professions of social work and public health. This last stage is not the end of the seed story, however, as the seeds (i.e., learning) themselves are a life force and in sharing them the story continues in perpetuity: there is no end. This sentiment is animated in the course as the final independent action-oriented project circles back to the first stage of the Seed Story, *receiving*, as the project is about moving students into a place of hope through social justice and transformation.

As students work through the course, artistic encounters are used to holistically deepen their connections to Indigenous knowledges and teachings as well as their critical thinking and reflection skills with respect to decolonizing practices in their professional fields. Each of the four stages (modules) of the Seed Story are graphically depicted with a unique central image (see Figure 1) and border, by Kaluyahawi (Jocelyn) Antone, an Oneida and Cree artist from Oneida of the Thames and Saddle Lake First Nations.

Artist Kaluyahawi also provided four written stories, one to accompany each stage, to raise awareness of acts of injustices against people of colour or Indigenous people (Antone in Daley et al., n.d.). For example, the graphic depiction of *compassion* (see Figures 2 and 3) is storied by Kaluyahawi in this way:

Figure 3. Seed story borders – Compassion border (Antone, 2021, August 5)

> Before the harvest, there is taking care or tending to the plants. When you're watering the plants, you don't want to put the water on the leaves during the day because it will burn them. So you need to take that tenderness and kindness and apply to gardening. You are then taking care of the plants instead of just watering them because it's a chore. I gotta take care of this, if I want sustenance for the new year; the plants are gonna sustain you during the winter months. You want to be able to have some good plants or good food. So that is a corn plant and those are scarlet runner beans. I guess that their English name is scarlet runners. But there is also another way: I call them Ohkwali (oh-gwa-lee) Ohsaheta (Oh-za-hey-da), or bear beans. If you look at the bean itself, you'll see it's purple and with marks that looks like the scratches or clawing of a bear. In this illustration, the sky is reminiscent of the fall sky and how it is starting

> to get colder. The weather is changing a tiny bit, where it's warm during the day, but it cools off in the in the afternoon or the evening. Of course, we get the stars again. Like I said, the stars have a lot of stories. Some of us try to follow the stars with ceremonies, because that's how a lot of our ceremonies are run. We watch the different stars in the sky and when they are in a certain position, we will do this ceremony, because it's now time to do it. So that it's an indicator of time, the stars. These hand tattoos are really cool because you can see how gradually it goes along. This is the third image. In the other two, in the cycle you do not see as many tattoos. Because as a person, you're also growing or continually adding to yourself, constantly growing or changing in different ways, and I just thought I would signify it on the hands with the hand tattoos. Those are traditional designs as well. The one on the thumb is interesting because it could either be the three sisters because of the three leaves, or it could be the three leaves on a tobacco plant, which is a sacred plant for a lot of Indigenous people. The dots represent seeds and more growth. I left the circle as it is so that the plant is growing up and out of it. Yeah, and you can kind of see that disconnect from the plant, the hands, and the background itself, where it's clear that you are still growing. The hands are in a gesture that acknowledges that you're sustaining my life, there's a real gratitude in that gesture, with the hand out, palm up. Some people say they don't have a green thumb and plants die on me all the time. Maybe it's because you got to be more thankful for them or something. I don't know. I sing to them. I talk to them. I give thanks to them. That's another thing that some ofus do. My mom and I sing seed songs to our plants. It's supposed to help take care of them. It is to make them want to grow and want to be here. My mom actually made a seed song. It's really nice, I love it. It's a really good seed song. She made it herself. I was really glad that she shared it with me, because I was able to record her singing it, and I now have a recording of it (Antone in Daley et al., n.d.).

In other ways, the culture of the virtual learning space is shaped by aesthetic pedagogy (Webster & Wolfe, 2013), challenging colonial teaching and learning practices that separate mind and body, while facilitating embodied, holistic learning, and supporting different kinds of learners more fully (Sajnani et al., 2020). For example, the first assignment of the course sets the tone by asking students to use Photovoice[4] (photography and group dialogue), an arts-based approach to research and learning, to help them think about what contributes to personal and shared wellbeing.

Finally, explicit practices that guide students' contributions to a relational teaching and learning space are used to enhance cohesion between the course's decolonizing intentions and the

4 Photovoice involves the creation of a photo image accompanied by a reflection to describe the image as it represents the learning that is being expressed through the photo. For this activity, students posted their photo images and written or recorded reflections so that other students could respond.

culture of its virtual teaching and learning space. We accomplish this by including course policies beyond those typical in colonial postsecondary institutions (e.g., academic dishonesty policies). For example, "kindness and respect," important Indigenous principles of peace and friendship, are included under the course outline section titled "Course and Department Policies:"

> Kindness and respect, even when we disagree, are necessary to encourage diversity of thought and discussion. It is expected that you demonstrate respect and positive consideration for students and instructors, in relation to ability, beliefs, gender, language, nationality, race, or sexuality. In your interactions with others in this course, please be sure to think carefully about the words you choose (Daley et al., n.d).

In addition, module activities and course assignments ask students to draw upon Indigenous concepts of ethical space, connection, and relational collaboration (Ermine, 2007; Goodchild et al., 2021), as well as Kariwiio (good mind/equal justice/righteousness), Kasastensera (strength in unity/respect/power), and Skenn:ne (peace) (Freeman &Van Katwyk, 2020) to bring students into cross-disciplinary, interprofessional processes of co-building relationships. As counter discourses to colonial postsecondary institutional cultures of individualism and competition in student learning these Indigenous concepts encourage a culture of relationship building, connection, and collaboration. They bring social work and public health students into dialogue for the purpose of critically reflecting on each profession's historical and contemporary relationship with colonization as well as their roles in sustaining and/or challenging colonizing discourses on well-being and health. In this way, course content, activities, and assignments serve to prioritize building relationships as a key course outcome as indicated by the overarching goal of bringing students into a relational (Two Row) teaching and learning community.

Collectively, the decisions and actions we made to blend the course's decolonizing and social justice intentions and the culture of the virtual teaching and learning space, in some ways, represents a transformation of "being, doing, and working" (Cote-Meek, 2018) in colonial postsecondary institutions. Our meaningful engagement with Indigenous knowledges, teachings, and art emanating from relationships created a unique virtual culture that, in turn, prioritized relationships, connection, and collaboration in the teaching and learning of decolonizing and social justice practices. For example, Smith et al., (2018) advocate for a "repositioning trend to strengthen kinds of teaching and research that is often fragmented and piecemeal and unsatisfying to teach" (p. 7). This is important because decolonizing wok that has failed to be meaningful often lacks coherence.

Concluding Thoughts

Within the bounds of academic institutions, balancing relationships, centring Indigenous voices, and prioritizing decolonizing and social justice intentions in the virtual teaching and learning space were not without challenges. To begin with, there were the timelines established by the respective schools along with the CEL, who were supporting the logistics of the build

of this distance course. To work authentically with the IAC as well as Indigenous contributors, filmmakers, and artists simply required more time than is factored into standardized course development schedules and milestones. Secondly, working within these realms, we quickly realized that funding structures were not in place to support the necessary level of engagement, or to adequately compensate the aforementioned individuals. Honoraria to compensate members of the IAC for their time and contributions at the start, for example, had to be creatively sourced across both academic units as well as the research funds of the institutional instructors. We quickly realized that additional funding to sustain the development and implementation of the course was required.

In the spring of 2021, we received a grant from eCampus Ontario's Virtual Learning Strategy (VLS). These funds were essential for supporting the continued engagement with the IAC and allowed for the hiring of an Indigenous student and an additional co-op student to provide research and administrative supports. The Indigenous film maker along with the Haudenosaunee artist were also contracted, using funds from this grant, to create and illustrate course components such as individual films with Indigenous contributors as guest lecturers. These illustrations as art, songs, and stories were core to the course: "Story kindles reciprocity. Story compels responsibility. Story thrives where there is respect. Story is a gift" (Kovach, 2021, p. 156).

Moving externally beyond our institution to acquire these essential funds, however, was not without risk. In developing a proposal to acquire the provincial funding, there was a sense that we were marketing the course and content in order to fund it. There were also stipulations associated with the funding that provided significant ethical challenges that we grappled with as we sought permissions from Indigenous contributors around complex issues of copyright and how knowledge is shared virtually. For example, IAC members raised concern about institutional copyright practices that would claim ownership of the contributions of Indigenous community members, scholars, and artists. We resolved ethical concerns associated with copyright by ensuring that the works of Indigenous contributors are protected by a "no derivates" (Ecampus Ontario, n.d.) copyright clause, thus, preventing their adaptation, remixing, transforming and/or updating. Merging university and provincial mandates and interests added to the complexities we often felt; we were torn between our collective intensions of transformative practices in course development and the reality of jurisdictional colonial structures as we navigated both provincial funding requirements and institutional expectations.

Smith, Tuck, and Yang (2018) remind us that universities and the entire field of postsecondary education, have, as their foundational component, an openness to and expectation of transformation. However, for colonial institutions entrenched among a myriad of colonial structures, transformation can be impeded in a variety of ways (Embrick & Moore, 2020). Multiple structures work together to sustain coloniality,[5] and these multiple structures

5 The process of colonization is one of historic and ongoing conquest. Coloniality describes the process by which the Euro Western worldview and way of knowledge is imposed and validated to become an over-riding Truth. For a detailed description of coloniality as a system of oppression, see https://www.yorku.ca/edu/unleading/systems-of-oppression/coloniality-and-settler-colonialism/ (York University, n.d.)

must be interrogated for the ways in which they can thwart meaningful change (Smith & Webber, 2018). The state must invest in its universities, where access needs to grow, and where access to opportunities can be created (Mbembe, 2016). Decolonizing academia needs to be a shared investment. In Ontario, since 2008, the provincial government has steadily decreased the grant funding it provides to universities (OCUFA, 2022), while, at the same time, freezing university-initiated tuition fee increases. Without governmental support, universities have limited resources to support authentic decolonization efforts such as hiring more diverse faculty, developing non-Eurocentric approaches to teaching and learning, and supporting research that, as collaborative and community-based, occurs outside of the hyper-productive, individualized, and context-free standards of Eurocentric academic settings (Mbembe, 2016). Conceivably, recent progress in the university towards the creation of an Indigenous-focused graduate diploma—that will include the course this paper discusses—signals both the transformative potential of the academy as well as innovative decolonizing strategies in the absence of adequate government funding.

Our collective hope is that by sharing the story of this cross-disciplinary, interprofessional collaborative process of course development, we can reveal how it taught us ways to push back against the coloniality of academic institutions. Especially in the context of the ongoing lack of resources to support a greater Indigenous presence in these same institutions, we have reflected on accountability with respect to the responsibilities of white settler academics to interrogate academic institutions and their ongoing efforts to discipline language and thought, and to institutionalize what it has determined to be the most valid knowledge (Smith, et al., 2018). More specifically, we have deeply considered how careful and meaningful actions anchor accountability. We have learned to proceed cautiously, advising against adopting our approach to Indigenous-focused course development across the institution, while advocating for the long-awaited structural changes needed to ensure and enhance the presence of Indigenous faculty, Elders, and knowledges in academic institutions. We have learned that to prioritize collaboration, dialogue, relationship building, and centring Indigenous voices, knowing, and doing often runs counter to the colonial logic of academic institutions. However, the decolonizing practices in course development processes that we highlight can foster learning and advocacy for what is needed to manifest the "next now" (Smith et al., 2018, p. 8) of Indigenous self-determination and collective resistance in academic institutions.

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