Discourse and Writing/Rédactologie

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Truth and Reconciliation through web design
Integrating Indigenist and Western approaches to teaching writing on a writing centre website

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Citer cet article

Bell, T., Keenan, C. & Faerber, J. (2024). Truth and Reconciliation through web design: Integrating Indigenist and Western approaches to teaching writing on a writing centre website. *Discourse and Writing/Rédactologie*, *34*, 55–81. https://doi.org/10.31468/dwr.1047

Résumé de l'article

We explore relationality and decolonization within the context of our shared attempts to blend Indigenist (Wilson & Hughes, 2019) and Western approaches to information sharing on a redesigned writing centre website. To reflect and honour the importance of story-telling in Indigenous ways of knowing and being, our core discussion is framed as a conversation that is experiential, reflective, and relational. We explain how the redesigned website supports students' learning about themselves as academic storytellers through invitational, meaningful, personal online experiences. By telling the story of where the project started and our motivations, choices, emotional experiences, and lessons learned, we articulate an actionable, broadly adaptable pedagogical approach to decolonizing academic writing support.

Article

Truth and Reconciliation through web design: Integrating Indigenist and Western approaches to teaching writing on a writing centre website

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Abstract

We explore relationality and decolonization within the context of our shared attempts to blend Indigenist (Wilson & Hughes, 2019) and Western approaches to information sharing on a redesigned writing centre website. To reflect and honour the importance of storytelling in Indigenous ways of knowing and being, our core discussion is framed as a conversation that is experiential, reflective, and relational. We explain how the redesigned website supports students' learning about themselves as academic storytellers through invitational, meaningful, personal online experiences. By telling the story of where the project started and our motivations, choices, emotional experiences, and lessons learned, we articulate an actionable, broadly adaptable pedagogical approach to decolonizing academic writing support.

Acknowledgements

redesign and to share our stories in this article. We would like to especially thank Cowichan and T'Sou-ke Nations Elder THE-LA-ME-YÉ Shirley Alphonse and SC'IÁNEW̱ Nation Elder TEȺĿIE D. Nadine Charles, as well as the other Elders of the Heron People Circle at Royal Roads University. The ownership of Indigenous Knowledge remains in perpetuity with Nations, and we requested and obtained permission to draw on that Knowledge for this article. We ask readers of this work to create their own relationships with Nations before requesting permissions to build on the Indigenous Knowledge shared in this work, as only Nations can grant those permissions.

Introduction

Royal Roads University is a small, publicly funded, applied research university located on the Traditional lands of the Lekwungen-speaking Peoples, the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations. Our programs focus on "inspiring people with the courage to change the world" (Royal Roads University, n.d.-b, para.1) by giving students experiences and learning that "transform their lives, advance their careers and tackle challenging global issues" (Royal Roads University, n.d.-a, para. 9). We offer blended, online, and on-campus programs to give students the flexibility to choose the modality that best suits their lives and learning needs.

In 2021, Royal Roads University's Writing Centre website underwent a substantial overhaul as part of a university-wide web redesign project. During the project, each of the university's websites was reviewed, moved to a new content management system, and the content and layout were redesigned. The Writing Centre team took this opportunity to build a site that blends Indigenist[1] and Western approaches to information sharing. This paper takes a similarly hybrid approach: aspects of the paper follow the traditional scholarly article format, but to reflect and honour the importance of storytelling in Indigenous ways of knowing and being (Kovach, 2010), the core of the discussion is framed as a conversation among the authors, who were the lead creators of the new Writing Centre website. The conversation shares stories about what we did, why we wanted to do it, how it felt to go through the process, and what we've learned so far. The document you're about to read began as a series of online discussions that were recorded in Zoom and automatically transcribed. We then edited, adapted, and shaped the information in subsequent conversations, using a collaborative writing process to create this article. Where it helps to convey the tone of a comment, we've indicated when we laughed, as you'd see in a transcript. We're continuing to use the informal tone of our verbal discussions with the hope that you'll feel like you've joined our conversation. As such, we're

deliberately avoiding some typical conventions of Western academic writing, such as a formal tone, prioritizing concision over storytelling, and using a third person objective point of view.

We invite you into this discussion and to create your own relationships with the information we're sharing. While it's typical for scholarly articles to provide directive suggestions to readers, we're stepping outside of that Western, colonial norm and instead inviting you to choose what information is relevant to you and your institutional context. We hope these reflections will have value to others in the Western academic community who are looking for ways to break open their institutions' learned and comfortable ways of knowing and being online.

Where Are We? Who Are We?

The writing of this piece and the work described in it took place on the Traditional Lands of the Lekwungen-speaking Ancestors and Families. We recognize and are grateful for the opportunities that we've experienced at the expense of Indigenous[2] Peoples. This article is underpinned by our desire to take action toward Truth and Reconciliation with good hearts and in good ways. The ownership of Indigenous Knowledge remains in perpetuity with Nations, and we obtained permission to share Indigenous Knowledge for this article. Readers should not build on the Indigenous Knowledge without receiving permission from the appropriate Nation, as only Nations can grant those permissions.

Meet Theresa

My name is Theresa Bell, and I am a fourth-generation settler with English, Irish, and Swedish ancestors. I grew up in Calgary, which is on the traditional territories of the people of the Treaty 7 region. The City of Calgary is also home to Métis Nation of Alberta, Region 3. I have been an uninvited visitor on the Traditional Lands of the Lekwungen-speaking Peoples, the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations, where I both live and work, since 2003. I am the Manager, Blended Learning Success, at Royal Roads, and I manage the Writing Centre.

Meet Caitlin

My name is Caitlin Keenan. My family is of primarily Gaelic ancestry, with deep roots in North America. I first came to personal awareness of my status as a settler colonist while growing up in the territories of the Nisga'a, Gitxsan, and Tsimshian Peoples, and now live and work on the lands of the

Xwsepsum and Lekwungen Ancestors and Families. Until August 2023, I was the Librarian for User Experience, Outreach, and Assessment at Royal Roads.

Meet Jonathan

My name is Jonathan Faerber. My mother is German-Canadian and my father is German. I moved to Canada in 2007 and have lived on the lands of the Lekwungen-speaking Peoples since 2019. In my professional role, I am an Academic Writing Specialist at Royal Roads.

Relationship to the Canadian Context

The redesign of the Writing Centre's website happened in an emergent way, so we did not consult written, scholarly literature on the topic of Indigenization to guide our process before we began. Instead of imposing an external "best practices" structure, we drew inspiration from Theresa's experiences of collaborating with Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Keepers to develop a resource for Indigenous students called the *Four Feathers Writing Guide.* As we will explain in our discussion, those experiences were rooted in relationships, conversations, and the respectful exploration and sharing of knowledge. One of the key drivers for our process was our desire to respond, albeit in a small way, to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada's *Calls to Action* (2015). The Canadian Federation of Library Associations - Fédération Canadienne des Associations de Bibliothèques (2017) identified key elements of the TRC's (2015) *Calls to Action* that pertain to the work of libraries and cultural memory institutions.[3] Recommendations (5) and (6) from that sub-report are as follows:

> 5. *Decolonize Access and Classification* by addressing the structural biases in existing schemes of knowledge organization and information retrieval arising from colonialism by committing to integrating Indigenous epistemologies into cataloguing praxis and knowledge management;
>
> 6. *Decolonize Libraries and Space* by recognizing and supporting Indigenous cultures, languages and knowledges through culturally appropriate space planning, interior design, signage, art installations, territorial acknowledgements of geographic-specific traditional territories and public programming in collaboration with local Indigenous stakeholders. (p. 7)

A Writing Centre website can be thought of as both a knowledge organization/information retrieval tool and a (digital) space. In the discussion that follows, we share our attempts, as white settlers working in a Western academic context, to answer the calls to action described above by reframing

the Writing Centre website as a cultural interface where Indigenist ways of knowing and being stand in conversation and partnership with Western ways.

How Will We Share Our Stories?

We are approaching sharing our stories with good hearts (Alphonse et al., n.d., Develop a Vision section) and tremendous respect for the Indigenous Knowledge that is at the core of the *Four Feathers Writing Guide*. Our experiences reflected the four Traditional stages of learning shared in the *Four Feathers Writing Guide*: "vision, gathering, knowledge, and sharing" (Alphonse et al., n.d., Welcome section). We've structured the sections of this article around those same four Traditional stages of learning in recognition of the connections between the Oral Tradition and academic writing (Alphonse et al., n.d., Connecting Oral Traditions section), as well as those between the *Four Feathers Writing Guide* and this article.

The story of what became the redesigned Writing Centre website begins with three narratives converging: Theresa was seeking an opportunity to extend the Indigenous Knowledge and approaches to learning shared in the *Four Feathers Writing Guide* to other prominent elements of the Writing Centre's resources and services. Jonathan was working directly with students and integrating the existing Writing Centre website into that work as a series of supporting resources. Caitlin was overseeing the overhaul of the Library and Writing Centre's web presences as part of the university-wide website redesign.

Three Narratives Converging

Caitlin: Theresa, can you begin by situating us in the context of the *Four Feathers Writing Guide* and your experience assisting in the creation of that work?

Theresa: Sure! The creation of the *Four Feathers Writing Guide* was a collaboration between Cowichan and T'Sou-ke Nations Elder THE-LA-ME-YÉ Shirley Alphonse, SC'IÁNEW̱ Nation Elder TEȺĿIE D. Nadine Charles, and me, with Teachings shared by other Coast Salish[4] Elders and Knowledge Keepers. Our goal was to create a resource that shares Coast Salish Teachings to support Indigenous students to develop as academic storytellers, with a secondary goal of sharing the information with non-Indigenous students who may be looking for an alternative to the dominant Western approach (Bell, 2020). The end result is an online guide with stories and relationships at its heart, as well as in the content and in the look and feel of the resource; for example, visitors can learn

about the significance in Coast Salish culture of the number four, the sacredness of feathers, and Teachings about birds (see Figure 1). Of particular relevance to this discussion are the four Traditional stages of learning that Elder Shirley and Elder Nadine shared in the guide: "Develop a vision: Be of good heart and mind" (Alphonse et al., n.d., Develop a Vision section), "Gather information: Learn more from others" (Alphonse et al., n.d., Gather Information section), "Identify knowledge: Prepare to tell the story" (Alphonse et al., n.d., Identify Knowledge section), and "Share your voice: Communicate your knowledge" (Alphonse et al., n.d., Share Your Voice section). Each stage offers Teachings to students to help them engage authentically with their writing processes, as well as relevant resources to help them move forward with telling their own stories.

Figure 1. Screenshot of the Home Page of the *Four Feathers Writing Guide*

The *Four Feathers Writing Guide* went live in 2019, and since then, student feedback on the guide has been very positive. We've heard from Indigenous students that the guide provides a way to think

about their academic storytelling that reflects the Teachings they bring with them to their academic experiences. We've also heard from students that they find the guide to be holistic and welcoming of their entire person and that it has helped to reduce fears about writing and aided with writer's block.

The story of the Writing Centre's website redesign begins about a year after the *Four Feathers Writing Guide* launched. I was feeling a strong responsibility to not sit complacently in the relationships that created the guide. The Elders and Knowledge Keepers placed such trust in me, and I carry that trust with me as a welcome responsibility to keep learning and growing, as well as to share what I've learned. I was actively looking for opportunities to extend the work we'd done in good ways. We were sharing the guide with students, but it was a bit lost as one small piece nestled within a much larger Writing Centre website.

Jonathan: I think that's a fair assessment – we had this wonderful resource that students were finding useful, but this guide was in danger of merely existing as a secondary piece on the periphery of a large online writing lab rather than the keystone that shapes everything we're doing in the Writing Centre, including our online presence.

At the same time, we recognized that the online writing lab had become the first point of contact for many students—especially the majority who complete their coursework online. Without Theresa's work on the original website, the job of meeting student expectations would have been impossible for her as the only staff member when the centre opened in 2007. Even today, with our small team of two full time and one casual staff, the website functions as another staff member to provide information outside of appointments so we can make the most of our time during our meetings with students. Theresa and I frequently added information to the website so that we could externalize our knowledge to make it accessible to everyone. Over time, that system had gotten pretty chaotic: we knew there was a lot of information, and we struggled keeping it organized and findable. That's where Caitlin came in.

Caitlin: That's right. In fall 2020, Royal Roads University was in the midst of a major web update. Every website from across the institution was being redesigned and upgraded. I was responsible for leading the Library's part of this work. The Writing Centre website was a key component of the Library's web presence, and I knew from the beginning that it was going to be the biggest challenge. The online writing lab that Theresa had created was a labour of love, and it was vast: 268 pages of content just in the main website, plus a wide array of FAQs and several guides hosted on auxiliary sites. It was a very well-used and well-loved resource, with hundreds of thousands of views a year.

However, because this information space had grown organically over about 15 years, there was some chaos in the system: issues of unclear labels, duplicated material—the sorts of things that happen when an information system grows naturally over time (see Figure 2). The popularity of the site had made it hard to make significant changes and implement a more strategic approach at any point. There was a reasonable fear of breaking something that so many people rely on.
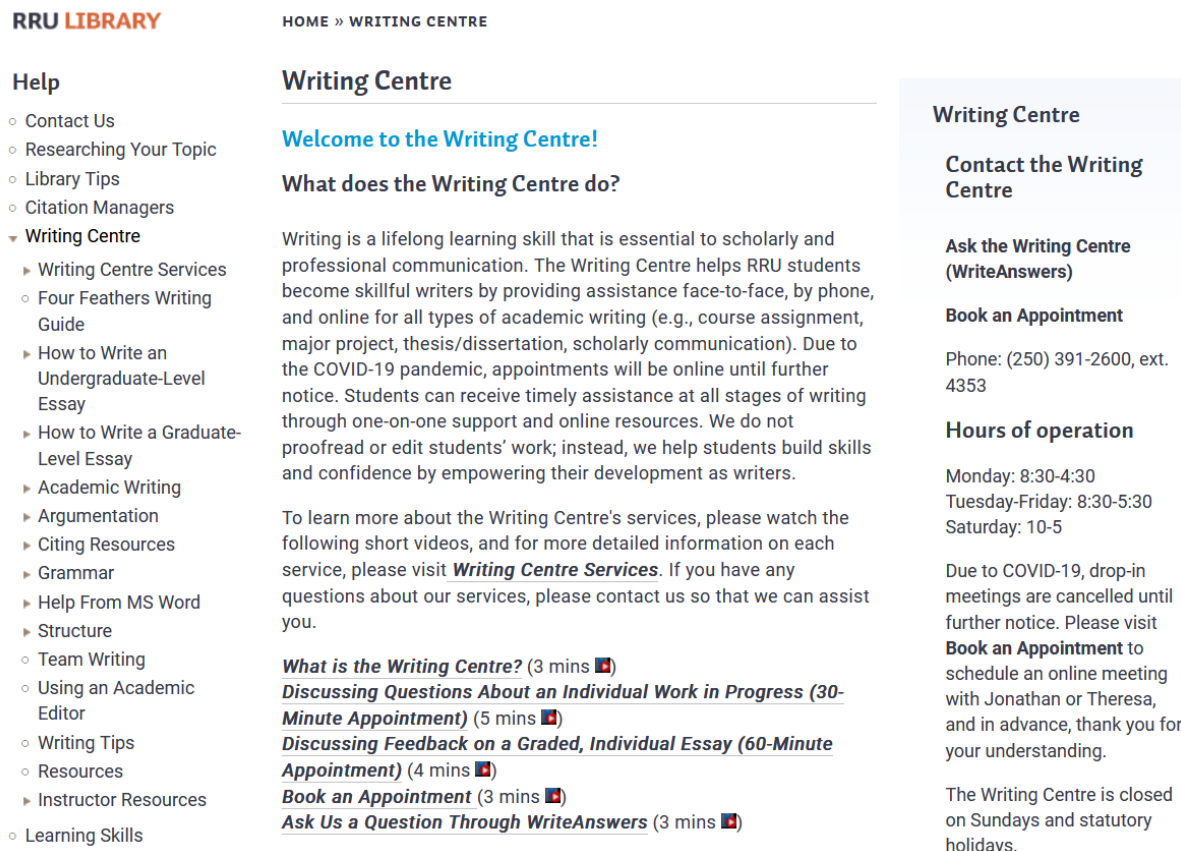
Figure 2. Partial Screenshot of the Writing Centre's Home Page Before Redesign

The institutional web redesign meant that a massive overhaul of the web platform was coming and we *had* to make major changes to accommodate the planned upgrades. I wanted to support the Writing Centre staff in seeing that change as an exciting opportunity instead of a loss. So, I came to Theresa and I asked her to "blue sky" her approach: if the Writing Centre website could be anything, what would it be?

Stage 1: Develop a Vision

"What do you see? What's your idea? Recognize you have something to contribute as an individual"
(Charles, 2018, as cited in Alphonse et al., n.d., Develop a Vision section).

Theresa: You were right, Caitlin, to suspect that I was fearing the web redesign project as a loss. I had a lot of anxiety about it. I also knew a change was necessary to make the site more user friendly and I wanted it to be something I could be excited about. When you asked me for my vision, I realized that this redesign could be an opportunity to further weave the Teachings shared in the *Four Feathers Writing Guide* into how the Writing Centre interacts with the world. That felt exciting! This website project presented an opportunity to extend the work forward in a good way.

I remember throwing my idea out to you and Jonathan, and then there was silence (laughs). I'm grateful, Caitlin, that you didn't immediately say no – not saying no was a major first step.

Caitlin: I don't think my first instinct was "no", but it was certainly, "Oh my gosh, what have I gotten myself into?" (laughs). There was a lot of discomfort in my initial reaction. On a surface level, the idea of using the *Four Feathers'* stages of learning as a frame for the website was intriguing, but also challenging in a way I hadn't anticipated. I had all these Western ideas about best practices for how a website works, and my understanding of those best practices felt diametrically opposed to what you were suggesting.

The choice I made was to allow myself to live in that discomfort. I definitely wasn't sure if it would work (or even what it would look like if it *did* work), but this felt like an important opportunity to do more than redesign for redesign's sake.

Living in Discomfort

Jonathan: I had similar worries at first about best practices from an instructional perspective. At the Writing Centre, we've traditionally used a linear web structure to organize information simply because that structure mirrors how we were taught to think about academic writing. When Caitlin asked us what we wanted the website to look like, I had thought about her question in terms of rearranging information into pre-existing Western categories. I didn't even think of challenging the overall structure itself because I was so embedded in it. Unconsciously, I was too focused on students who were already served by the website to think about students who were excluded. The idea of completely moving away from the old website was an exciting and uncomfortable risk.

Theresa: An advantage I had early on was not only my familiarity with the material in the *Four Feathers Writing Guide* but also with the value of getting uncomfortable. One of my major lessons from the experience of developing the *Four Feathers Writing Guide* was the necessity of getting uncomfortable to try new things and learn. And this web project was uncomfortable! While we had this vision, we had no idea where we'd end up, if it would work, and we still had all the project deliverables we needed to meet, the constraints of the technology, and a hard deadline of when the website had to go live. Choosing a path of discovery, instead of staying with what was familiar, was intimidating. So was knowing that other people could say "no" at any point. However, we took things one step at a time, and learned as we went.

Stage 2: Gather Information

"Gather information, bring it together and combine it with your knowledge so that you can prepare to share" (Charles, 2018, as cited in Alphonse et al., n.d., Gather Information section).

Caitlin: At this stage, we had a basic idea: we wanted to present the existing content from the Writing Centre website through the lens of the four Traditional stages of learning shared in the *Four Feathers Writing Guide:* "vision, gathering, knowledge, and sharing" (Alphonse et al., n.d., Welcome section)*.* What that meant in practice, however, was unclear. My first priority was to create an initial map that would serve as a proof of concept. I needed to understand what the vision that Theresa had described would be in practice: What would the website look like? What were the key elements? Fundamentally, we needed to make sure students could get to information and that we maintained functional utility while introducing this more organic approach.

Theresa: What I recall about that time is a lot of individual work where we each worked separately to test this proof of concept and to find a path that made sense to us. When we came back together, we discovered that while we were using different approaches, we found exciting relationships and synchronicities that we didn't expect but that motivated us to keep going.

Jonathan: Finding those alignments happened more easily than I thought it would. As we continued to find similarities between our plans, I accepted that there was potential for the approach to work for our website visitors as well.

Theresa: Me too – and another key step in that process was the ongoing consultation with Elder Shirley and Royal Roads' Director of Indigenous Education, Russ Johnston. It was exciting when they both could see our vision and encouraged us to keep going. That consultation happened throughout the process to ensure we had the necessary permissions to share Teachings, as well as to make sure

that we were demonstrating respectful relationships in our words and actions. However, it was also important that the onus was on us to do the work versus creating a burden for Indigenous people to guide our process. I didn't want to sit complacently in the collaborations that created the *Four Feathers Writing Guide*. We worked intentionally to build on the extensive consultation that went into creating the *Four Feathers Writing Guide* while continuing to seek permissions, suggestions, and feedback to ensure we were extending that work in good ways.

Caitlin: I was very much on board with the importance of that work, but it was a major learning curve for me—I had only skimmed the *Four Feathers Writing Guide* and had little experience engaging with Indigenous ways of knowing and being. I had a lot of white fragility going on—an almost paralyzing fear of engaging *the wrong way*, if you know what I mean—as well as a lot of uncertainty as to whether we could incorporate these Teachings into something that would also be a usable tool for information retrieval in a Western academic context.

The way we moved gradually through exploration and discovery helped a lot. I took that initial step, and then our incremental approach gave me the space to go through the process of getting comfortable in the discomfort. We didn't commit until we all felt confident. Of course, that sort of process is a gamble and a luxury. There was the risk that we might get five steps down the path and it wouldn't work. However, I kept coming back to the knowledge that, no matter what, the Writing Centre website was going to have a structural overhaul. Because of that, I never felt what we were doing was a potential loss. All that work was necessary, no matter the outcome.

It's funny, because by doing this work one step at a time, you wind up walking into the unknown far enough that it becomes known. I couldn't have envisioned where we got to from where we started.

Doorways, Not Fences

Caitlin*:* For me, the key shift that let this project move from a nice idea to a thing we could actually build was a realization that the four stages of learning weren't a replacement for a traditional Western information architecture. For the longest time my assumed approach was to employ the Traditional stages of learning—"vision, gathering, knowledge, and sharing" (Alphonse et al., n.d., Welcome section)—as discrete top-level information categories, and to seek a 1:1 mapping between those stages of learning and the writing lab content. But that just didn't work.

And, well—of course it didn't work. I was taking something from an Indigenist way of thinking about the world and trying to shove it into a Western framework. As we worked together, I came to realize that the Traditional stages of learning aren't fenced-off areas. They aren't discrete categories

of information; they are *doorways*, inviting a person to explore information that might be helpful during their writing journey. Instead of starting from "here's the information we have; pick what you need," it starts from "who are you, in relation to the world and your writing, and what sorts of information might help you move forward?" When you ask those kinds of questions, you don't arrive at discrete categories of information. A student who's developing their voice doesn't need one specific type of information that's completely distinct from the information they need when they're editing their work.

Jonathan: "Fences" are a great metaphor to describe the previous format of the website. We used categories like "grammar" and "APA Style" to list things and fence them off from each other based on the labels we wanted or expected students to use. But a student doesn't necessarily separate all of these things and work on them in isolation—at least not if they aren't already embedded in a very particular way of thinking about writing.

Caitlin: Exactly. I think I'd been resistant to that realization because it felt like allowing the relational, Indigenist approach meant throwing out information architecture altogether. But it didn't need to be either/or. It could be both/and. We could take an *invitational* approach that offered many alternative paths to information.

In practice, "both/and"—incorporating a relational, Indigenist approach alongside a Western information architecture—meant a content model. A key advantage we had was access to multiple web properties, including our main website (the one undergoing the redesign), as well as a LibGuides[5] site for subject matter guides (of which the *Four Feathers Writing Guide* is one example). That meant we could design two very different information spaces. We decided that LibGuides would host all the "writing lab"–style content, subdivided according to standard Western categories of information, while our main website would provide a front door into that information via an Indigenist approach that focuses on relational learning through storytelling.

This division of labour meant that we weren't actually taking a radically unusual approach to organizing the information. Instead, we were *overlaying* a standard Western information architecture with a separate Indigenist framework that allowed students to check in with themselves, their learning, and their writing to find their way into the information they need. So, we weren't losing anything, and we weren't making a messy compromise between incompatible approaches, either. Instead, we were creating two intersecting layers with connection points between them that make explicit the relationships between two different ways of organizing and finding information. With that leap, we were finally ready to put all this information together and create a website.

Stage 3: Identify Knowledge

"You have knowledge different from anyone else that has been passed down to you from Elders, family, and life experience. You've also learned from resources, such as books and online materials" (Charles, 2018, as cited in Alphonse et al., n.d., Identify Knowledge section).

A Human Presence

Theresa: Relationships are at the centre of an Indigenist worldview, and they're at the centre of our interactions with students, too: relationships between the Writing Centre and students, between students and the information provided online, between resources. We wanted to give visitors a welcoming, inviting, non-directive personal experience to getting to the information they're seeking that is akin to how we meet students in person. When we meet with students, we don't necessarily expect them to know exactly the thing that they're looking for, but the old website required that understanding due to how we'd fenced off the content. It was very prescriptive.

Jonathan: Right. In an online writing lab, the topics—grammar, citation style, and so forth—can be uninviting and intimidating, and the reality is that focusing solely on writing topics doesn't reflect our conversations with students. Those discussions frequently start with students explaining their experiences with writing, such as "My instructor told me I need to strengthen my paragraphs and I thought I was already doing a good job of that so I'm feeling very confused and frustrated", versus them asking for specific writing-related content: "Tell me how to build a strong argument that has a clear structure and effectively uses evidence to persuade the reader". It's through asking students questions that we find out what students need. After all, if they already knew what information they needed, they probably wouldn't be reaching out for help. They're coming to the Writing Centre for guidance on moving through their emotional journey with writing, which naturally leads to seeking concrete information.

Theresa: Absolutely, and we're trying to mirror that experience with the new website by asking students questions to help them identify what they want to find and by focusing on building those relationships. My hope is that students will recognize a human presence in the tone and format we've used: "We're glad you're here. What would you like to know? Are these questions you're having? If so, you're not alone, and we can help." That human presence also means we're being transparent about who we are and overtly taking responsibility for our approach, so students know there are

actual people behind the website. I hope people feel that we're opening the door for them and saying, "Come on in, you're very welcome here, have a look around!"

A Focus on Storytelling

Caitlin: So that was the approach we wanted to take. As we started working with the institution's external design team to make it a reality, however, we ran into some more challenges—places where the Western and Indigenist approaches bumped up against one another.

Theresa: A good example of that was in the text we used on the website itself. Due to the importance of stories in the Oral Tradition (Alphonse & Charles, 2018, as cited in Alphonse et al., n.d.), I felt strongly about the web pages telling stories. We kept coming up against constraints on character limits and page design, but I wanted full sentences and paragraphs, not bulleted lists. Thinking about academic writing as storytelling, and reflecting that approach on the website, offers students a relationship between the stories they know and the academic stories they want to tell. That, for me, was essential to what we were doing. This is the point where it would be helpful for our audience to see the design of the new page so they can see how it differs from the old site, though the text will be too small to read (see Figure 3). I'm hoping interested readers will visit the website so they can see the details.
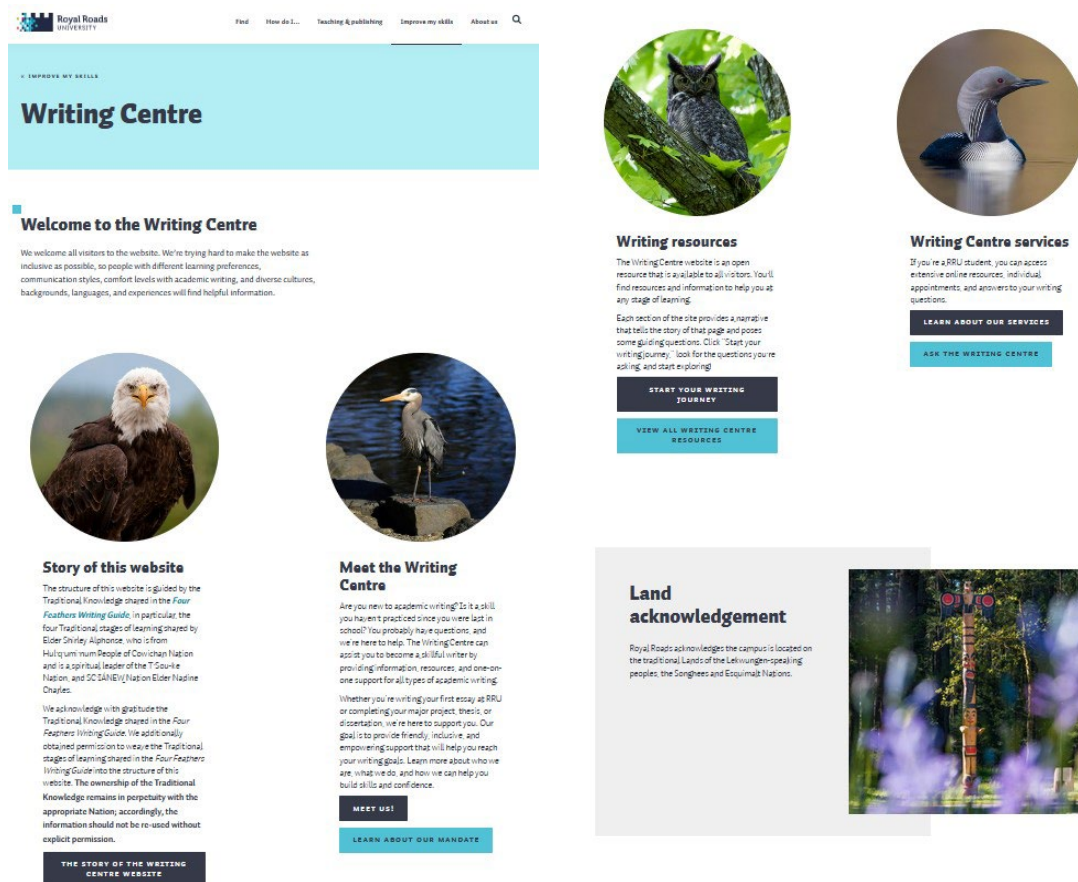
Figure 3. Screenshots of the Top and Bottom Halves of the Writing Centre's Home Page

Caitlin: Coming to this project with a set of Western user experience principles and best practices for web writing, I struggled a bit when it came to applying Indigenist principles to the actual content. Western principles steer web content creators firmly away from a narrative, prose-heavy style. Everything is supposed to be chunked, labelled, and scannable, with solid usability and accessibility reasons for those principles (Nielsen, 2008; Suetterlin, 2021). There's nothing more ingrained in the Western mindset of "the best way" than that pressure for efficiency. Academia trains us to it, too, because in most university programs you don't have enough time to read everything. You have to prioritize and maximize utility.

This tendency in the Western tradition comes up hard against an Indigenist approach. As a Western person, it can be incredibly jolting to come up against a context where you're expected to be deliberate, intentional, and fully present with your spirit as well as your mind. Storytelling and full sentences, although they are intended to help people fully understand the information, as well as its

context, run in conflict with the way that folks raised in a Western academic tradition are expecting to receive knowledge.

Theresa: Western user experience best practices are a self-perpetuating cycle. We think bulleted lists and maximum efficiency are best because that's what we're trained to think. While I understood the constraints of the technology, I wanted to do my best to reflect the approach shared in the *Four Feathers Writing Guide*, which is all about stories.

An example of that balance we tried to strike is the text under *Story of This Website* (see Figure 4) that describes how the website is structured by Traditional Knowledge shared in the *Four Feathers Writing Guide*, gives credit to the Elders who shared the Teachings, notes the permissions we sought to share the Knowledge, and emphasizes the Nations' ownership of the copyright of the Teachings:

Figure 4. Screenshot of the *Story of This Website* Section

My draft text had too many characters because there was a hard limit in the system, so I had to cut some text. I found it troubling to delete words that expressed arguably the most important message on that page because of character constraints. We ended up with a version that I'm satisfied with because all the necessary details are there, but it was an example of where there was a challenging

compromise between the expectations of Western web design and ensuring we were being respectful of Indigenous ways of knowing and being.

Patience with Process

Caitlin: The tension we came up against here is probably not surprising. The Western obsession with efficiency in information gathering is arguably the place where there is the least synchronicity with the Indigenist approach. As best I can describe it, from what I've learned from talking with you about your experience of developing the *Four Feathers Writing Guide* and from talking to Indigenous Peoples, an Indigenist approach requires a *patience with process*. An appreciation that the journey is as important as the end goal. That patience is emphatically not present in the way that most Western folks are trained to approach information seeking. We are trained in the Western tradition to get as much information as quickly as we can. A user experience manual I came across recently actually used the phrase "it almost goes without saying" when describing the importance of a user's ability to "carry out tasks with the minimum expenditure of time and effort" (de Voil, 2020).

What I worked to keep in mind was that the site isn't about "how can I most efficiently absorb this technical information"—it's operating on a different level from that. It's about helping students decide what story they're telling and access the knowledge they need to do so. Within that context, I believe there's a unique value to using full sentences and paragraphs of text, even on a website. We're using the way we present the information to help illustrate to visitors how we hope they will engage with it. You *need* to slow down to use this website. It's not a site that's designed for searching for your keyword and getting right where you think you want to go as fast as possible; doing so misses the point of the experience. We do give people the option to bypass that experience—if you want to just skip over to standard search/browse, you can do so and find the information you want. However, we hope the structure of the site will encourage people to allow themselves to slow down and think it through. Read the information, sit in that space, and experience what they feel.

Design Story

Jonathan: You've each talked about the content of the site, and the challenges in reconciling that content with an Indigenist approach to learning. But what about the presentation of that content? Can you talk more about what the pages look like, and why they look that way?

Theresa: I wanted the design choices to run deeper than a surface nod with everything else being typically Western. Aside from the actual way we presented information, we had other design pieces that we were trying to achieve that reflected Coast Salish Teachings, such as the importance of the number four (Alphonse et al., n.d., Welcome section) and incorporating circles into the page design, which I know was a big ask! (laughs)

Caitlin: The external design team did look a little pale when I came to them talking about circles! The elements we were asking for were different from the standard design components being used across the main university website, and even across the rest of the Library website. I give the design team credit though for listening to what I had to say and coming back with some design options that reflected our requests. We figured out quickly that designing the Writing Centre homepage as a literal circle was not going to work—especially given that we also needed a design that could accommodate ample narrative text—but we found a way to incorporate circles as image blocks in a four-panel page design. The four-panel design is persistent as a visitor moves through the site: four welcome panels on the homepage, four stages of learning, four invitational questions in each stage, and four highlighted resources for each question.

Theresa: We've also used local bird imagery throughout the site that reflects the birds that act as symbols for the four Traditional stages of learning in the *Four Feathers Writing Guide*. Just as in the *Four Feathers Writing Guide*, the bald eagle, great blue heron, great horned owl, and the loon connect to the sections of the website that respectively focus on developing a vision, gathering information, identifying knowledge, and sharing your voice. My hope was that by tying that imagery throughout the website, the birds would serve as markers for visitors; for example, if someone is on a page with the photo of an eagle on it, they know they're reading information about developing a vision (see Figure 5). I also hoped that providing some beautiful photos of birds would add to the overall experience of the website.
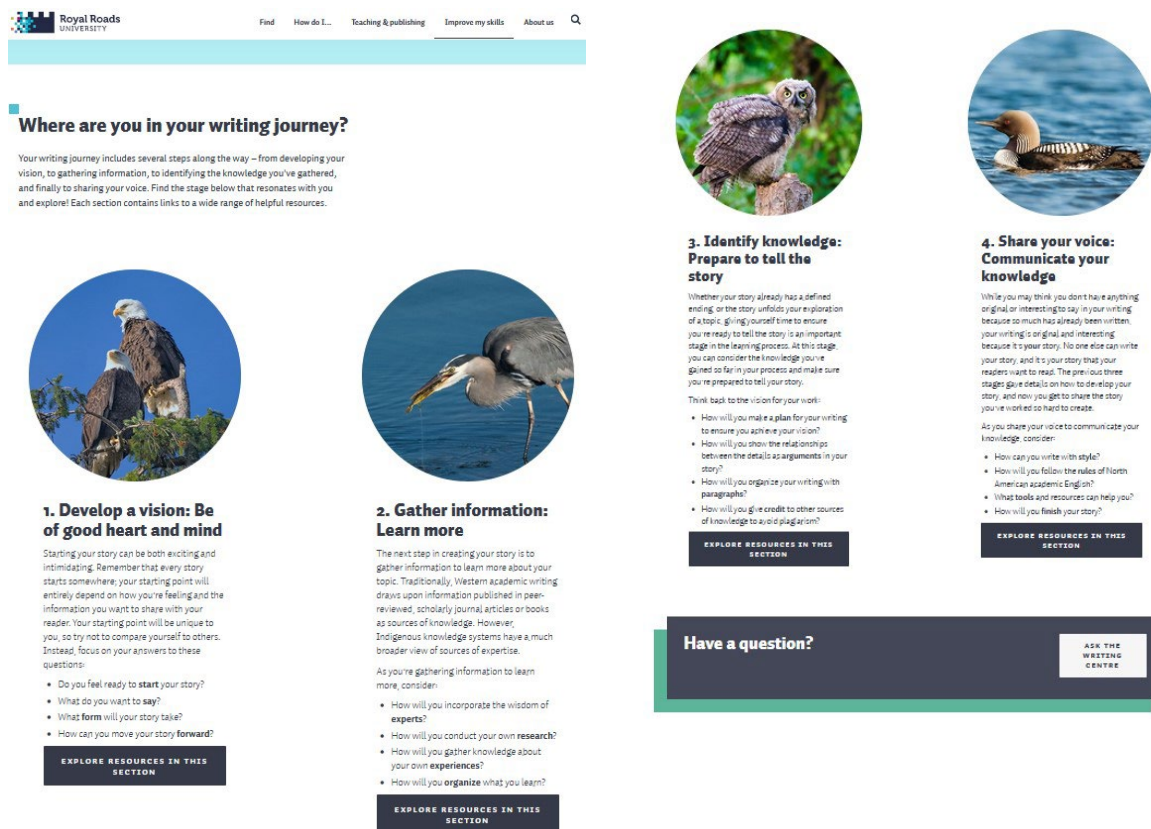
Figure 5. Screenshots of the Top and Bottom Halves of the *Start Your Writing Journey* Page

Caitlin: Perhaps the most controversial design element on the site isn't the circles, or the birds, or even the narrative-style prose, but the order of presentation of material on the homepage. The top two quadrants of the page are the *Story of This Website* (including the copyright acknowledgement information you spoke about, Theresa), and *Meet the Writing Centre*, which introduces the staff (see Figure 3). You have to scroll a fair way down that page before you get to the sections on writing resources and the Writing Centre's services. This is a deliberate inversion of expectations, and it's a key piece of how we are centering relationships and stories on this site, rather than transactions and solutions.

Jonathan: That's the message I want students to have when they see the website for the first time: we want them to read those two introductory sections at least once, and if they are only going to read it once, we hope that will happen before they look for specific information. We can't control how people navigate the site, but that's the approach I encourage students to take to get the full experience. Time will tell if people are leaning into that experience.

Stage 4: Share Your Voice

"Share your knowledge. Each time you share, someone will learn something new, even in its smallest detail" (Charles, 2018, as cited in Alphonse et al., n.d., Share Your Voice section).

Caitlin: We launched the new website in August 2021. I think we were really braced for negative responses because we were inverting people's expectations quite dramatically, but there wasn't that much pushback. When we did get initial feedback, it centred on those things we just discussed: the website asks you to participate in your story versus plugging you straight into technical information. That flipping of expectations did generate some frustrated feelings. However, what was interesting to me is that we didn't hear complaints from students in that initial response—we heard it from faculty, "on behalf" of students. We had a couple of professors telling us, "Students aren't going to be able to deal with this; this isn't what they expect from a Writing Centre website"—but they were talking in the hypothetical. What we didn't have was students telling us they didn't like it or couldn't find what they need.

Theresa: I remember when that feedback came in, I felt frustrated and disappointed, but once I processed those emotions, I felt even more determined. The feedback suggested that some people felt uncomfortable because their experience of the website didn't match up with their Western expectations—but that discomfort is part of the larger point of the website, so the feedback told me we were going in the right direction. Not that we were trying to make people angry, but we clearly achieved the goal of having people experience the website in a different way than they were used to.

Jonathan: This project was such a study in how we don't notice most of the assumptions we are making until we question them. There was freedom in asking ourselves, "What if the way that we think, or the way that works for people who thinks like us, is not the best way, or at least not the only way?" I don't know about you, but I struggle with being honest with myself when something I care about isn't working the way I want it to. And as someone who was accustomed to using binary distinctions to communicate with students, it wasn't easy for me to admit that we were fencing people out, especially because that was the opposite of what we intended. It took me a while to get used to the idea that a website structured in a way that makes sense to me won't work for every student. I suspect some faculty have a similar shift to make. If they're drawing on many years of formal education in a North American or European context, they may well be similarly and understandably entrenched in Western academic thought patterns.

Caitlin: That initial feedback speaks to the weight of the Western academic status quo and how change happens at a frustratingly slow pace in post-secondary education. In their article, "Toward Indigenizing University Policy", Sasakamoose and Pete (2015) argued that "the work of Indigenizing the academy exposes places where dominant structures must be re-made in order to embrace other than dominant ways of knowing and doing" (p. 4). That's what we were trying to accomplish in a small way here: finding a starting point for disrupting the status quo in the way we are organizing and sharing knowledge and creating space.

That disruption manifests as a deliberate inversion of Western expectations around how content is served up on a website. The structure of the site purposefully emphasizes context and relationships versus the shortest route to concrete information. Because of that, engaging with this website is inherently an exercise in *patience with process*, in slowing down and taking time to be of a good heart and mind and trusting in the journey. As Wilson and Hughes (2019) explained, engaging with Indigenist epistemology involves having "a methodology of attending, which has to do with caring, bringing one's whole being to the process of engaging and communicating with the human and more-than-human entities that make us who we are" (p. 11). For someone who's been trained to seek the most direct route to the most essential information, it's a paradigm shift. Pausing to *attend*—to think, breathe, and just be—may feel strange and annoying if maximum efficiency is your expectation.

Disrupting the status quo can make people who like the status quo uncomfortable. And that's okay! If people like us are a bit uncomfortable using this website, that's actually fine. That's a feature, not a bug. There's value in that discomfort.

Theresa: Exactly. Through my experiences of collaborating with Elders and Knowledge Keepers to create the *Four Feathers Writing Guide*, I learned that when I'm uncomfortable, I need to ask why. I am hoping that visitors to the website who find it an uncomfortable experience might at some point consider why the site makes them uncomfortable and accept that as an invitation to learn more. We're trying through our actions to show that it's not a bad thing to slow down and consider the full context of what you're seeking and why.

I've accepted that I can't take responsibility for whether people are ready or willing to have that experience. However, I can take responsibility for my intentions and actions in putting the website out in the world. Our online presence is the public face of the Writing Centre, and we get hundreds of thousands of visitors to our online resources every year from all over the world. In our daily work in the Writing Centre, we are doing our best to decolonize our thoughts, choices, and actions, and work toward Truth and Reconciliation. The website gave us an opportunity to put that intention into action

on a bigger scale: this website is how we're putting ourselves out into the world with good hearts and in good ways that are respectful of Indigenous Knowledge and approaches to learning.

My inner voice is warning me against sounding too self-congratulatory. I don't know if we've achieved that goal, nor if we'll ever know if we've achieved it, but I believe there's value in trying. Let's stand behind what we're trying to do, knowing that we're going to make mistakes along the way, but that showing up, mistakes and all, is itself important.

A Bigger Shift in Thinking

Jonathan: While we haven't received formal feedback from students, I can speak to my lived experience using the website when I'm working with students. I mentioned earlier that our website is our first point of contact with students, and it helps when that initial interaction is calming and welcoming rather than an experience that frustrates or discourages people. What we are seeing ultimately is that people *respond* to the website. They sometimes respond with curiosity. Sometimes with surprise. They might wonder "Where am I?", "What am I looking at?", "How do I use this?" And that's part of the thoughtfulness we want to encourage. If nothing else, we want students to feel engaged rather than overwhelmed.

I hope the online experience now better reflects our in-person interactions. We want students to feel like they're being pulled gently along a river that meanders through a digital landscape. That landscape is still populated by information about grammar and style and sentence structure, but the pathway through those resources feels different. Part of what we get to do now in our day-to-day interactions is guide students along that river and point out the things upstream or downstream that are prominent features of the landscape, so to speak. It's so much easier to do that way-finding in a river than a sea of information.

Ultimately, making the decisions about the website has also influenced me to take a similar approach to the way I talk about writing with students in real time. I am now more conscious and on guard against the assumption that the way I learned about writing is the way that everyone should be learning. I am more intentional about centering the conversations on the students' needs and their approach to writing rather than centering the conversation entirely on what I think or even what their instructor thinks academic writing looks like. Those patterns of interaction reflect the conscious decisions we made about the website. We wanted the website to empower students to take back control of their own learning and show them that they are in charge, and that they get to decide what

they need. Because ultimately what's relevant is that they don't feel lost, especially if they don't happen to think and write like I do.

If every student writing a paper has a different learning experience than they used to, that adds up to a lot of change. I'd like to think this change has ripple effects beyond these interactions. In the big picture, success is decolonizing the institution, which means we're doing nearly everything differently. In this big picture, a website is not a comprehensive solution—it's just a start.

Sharing What We've Learned (So Far)

"Even though readers may have some familiarity with the topic, hearing your distinctive voice through your writing will give readers the opportunity to learn something new" (Alphonse et al., n.d., Share Your Voice section).

Caitlin: A major lesson for me was how wired I am toward binary thinking – that idea that trying something new was an either/or proposition. Binary thinking has been described as a characteristic of white supremacy culture (Buford, n.d., as cited in Okun, 2023), and for me personally it's a subtle thing that I hadn't even realized was baked into my worldview. An Indigenist way of thinking sees two approaches as existing in relationship to one another and seeks to find the balance and the threads of connection between them (Wilson & Hughes, 2019, p. 7). That's very powerful, and the fact that it took us so long to get there is reflective of how deep our innate assumptions and biases run.

Theresa: Right. It comes back to relationships again, doesn't it? For me, finding the relationships between the information systems was essential, and so were the relationships we built with each other. Each of us brought important pieces to the work and the sum of the collaboration was so much greater than our individual parts.

My other main takeaway is that the value of the work is in the trying, not necessarily in the end result. That's not to minimize the end result, but it's not necessary to have a guaranteed outcome that meets a set of Western deliverables for there to be value in the effort. Which, again, is only a "discovery" because we've been trained in a results-focused Western value system.

Jonathan: As simplistic as it sounds, the thing I keep learning and need to be reminded of is that *I am the status quo*. I was born, educated, and embedded in a way of learning that is designed to fence people out, and this website project illustrates what's possible once we let go of things that we don't necessarily know we are holding on to until we consider alternatives. So, it's with the benefit of hindsight that we now see that our previous website and resources mirrored our particular patterns

of being, thinking, and communicating, but we would never have arrived at anything different from that if we simply trusted the status quo instead of actively challenging and questioning the way we've done things in the past.

What we tried to do here instead is to create something that reflects who our students are, that also reflects where we physically are located. We really wanted to make sure it wasn't just people like us who see themselves in the website. To do that, we had to let go of some of our learned habits and the things that we thought were important and, in many cases, literally delete things that we invested a lot time into over years. And I suspect there is still more of that work ahead of us, because the real danger now (as before) is in deciding that our work is finished, when really we've only just started.

Theresa: I'm similarly reminded that my journey toward Truth and Reconciliation also requires daily actions with conscious decisions. However, it's something I can do alone and with others. There's the potential to make a difference in some small capacity and doing so in relationship with colleagues such as you and Caitlin makes it easier for me to come forward with ideas to see what potential might exist.

I'm excited about the possibility of finding other opportunities. One of my major lessons continues to be leaning into the discomfort of not knowing whether something's going to work. Even if the thing fails, it's worth trying, because you might end up with something that is so much more than you thought possible.

Caitlin: I hope we can build on this work as a firm foundation when we look to future projects that build toward decolonization at Royal Roads. I'm excited about the possibilities!

The End of the Story—For Now

Thank you for sitting with us and sharing our stories of learning and website creation. We hope this narrative has helped inspire you to explore places where you can also encourage cultural interfaces between standard Western academic spaces and Indigenist ways of knowing and being. Harvey and Russell-Mundine (2019) warned that "it is arguable whether colonisers can decolonise the higher education space or whether disciplines founded on Western epistemologies can decolonise their own curricula" (p. 794). With this warning in mind, and with an awareness of our own position as colonizers, we hesitate to provide detailed suggestions or advice for others in the higher education space on their own decolonization efforts. The journey you take will depend on your own personal, local, and cultural context, and the relationships you build along the way. While we remain

respectfully cognisant of our position as white settlers and the boundaries of our cultural understandings, we also hold in our hearts a desire to share the onus of responsibility for change and lift that work from the shoulders of Indigenous Peoples. We recognize we have a great deal of work to do, and we're eager to continue our journey with good hearts. With that intention in mind, we circle back to where this story began: moving toward Truth and Reconciliation in good ways. We're going to keep making mistakes along the way, but we want to take meaningful action and learn from our experiences. We hope you'll join us.

Endnotes

1. Definition of Indigenist:

   A philosophical approach to research that centres Indigenous ontology, epistemology, and axiology (Wilson, 2008) or Ways of Knowing, Ways of Being, and Ways of Doing (K. Martin & Mirraboopa, 2003). Indigenist research is about who we are, how we know, and engage with Knowledge, what we do as researchers, and the ways we enact relational accountability. . . . So, we're using Indigenist to label a philosophy that includes a relational and emergent understanding of reality and Knowledge, and requires a particular way of behaving in the world. (Wilson & Hughes, 2019, p. 7)

2. "Indigenous terminology represents First Nations, Métis, and Inuit groups as indicated by the Canadian government and is used interchangeably throughout this work" (Alphonse et al., n.d., Home Page).

3. A writing centre is not a library, and the needs and responsibilities of the two institutions are distinct. As the Writing Centre exists within Royal Roads University's Library, one of the authors of this paper is a librarian, and several of the CFLA-FCAB's recommendations are directly relevant to the work described here, we believe this document provides a helpful starting point for showing the relationships between our work and the context of the TRC report.

4. "Coast Salish represents families that reside on the land of the east coast of Vancouver Island, portions of the lower mainland of British Columbia, and Washington State" (Alphonse et al., n.d., Home Page).

5. LibGuides is an online content platform frequently used in libraries to host librarian-created subject guides to support student research assignments.

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