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Résumé de l'article

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TEACHING REFLECTION

Teaching Indigenous Language Revitalization over Zoom

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In this teaching reflection, co-authored by an instructor and a teaching assistant, we consider some of the unanticipated openings for deeper engagement that the "pivot" to online teaching provided as we planned and then delivered an introductory course on Indigenous language documentation, conservation, and revitalization from September to December 2020. We engage with the fast-growing literature on the shift to online teaching and contribute to an emerging scholarship on language revitalization mediated by digital technologies that predates the global pandemic and will endure beyond it. Our commentary covers our preparation over the summer months of 2020 and our adaptation to an entirely online learning management system, including integrating what we had learned from educational resources, academic research, and colleagues. We highlight how we cultivated a learning environment centred around flexibility, compassion, and responsiveness, while acknowledging the challenges of this new arrangement for instructors and students alike. Finally, as we reflect on some of the productive aspects of the online teaching environment—including adaptable technologies, flipped classrooms, and the balance between synchronous and asynchronous class meetings—we ask which of these may be constructively incorporated into face-to-face classrooms when in-person teaching resumes once more.

Keywords: Indigenous language revitalization; online learning; digital classroom; technology; COVID-19; pandemic

Introduction: Harnessing Technology to Think Critically About the Power of Technology

We work and teach at the Point Grey Campus of the University of British Columbia (UBC) in Vancouver, located on the traditional, ancestral, and unceded territory of the hən̓q̓əmiṇ̓əm-speaking Musqueam people (University of British Columbia 2021). In our work, and in this jointly written article, we suggest that a recognition of the stark reality of settler occupation entails a sustained engagement with the ongoing violence of colonialism. In particular, we see opportunities for translating the implications of post-secondary institutions operating on occupied lands—for which they do not pay rent and have no right to own—into critical and creative learning opportunities in the classroom that go beyond mechanical and increasingly problematic performative demonstrations of institutional guilt in the form of "territorial acknowledgements" (Wilkes et al. 2017).

In this teaching reflection, we discuss an entry level, three-credit course offered by the First Nations and Endangered Languages Program entitled FNEL 180, which co-author Turin originally developed in 2015 and has taught annually since then. The First Nations and Endangered Languages Program (formerly the First Nations Languages Program) was established in 1996 as part of UBC's commitment to community-based collaboration with First Nations peoples, in recognition of the profound importance of First Nations languages and the rich cultural traditions they represent (cf. Pine and Turin 2017). This undergraduate

program, now strengthened with a recently approved major and minor specialization, is housed in the Faculty of Arts. Together with the First Nations and Indigenous Studies Program, the First Nations and Endangered Languages Program forms the newly established Institute for Critical Indigenous Studies.

FNEL 180, the topic of our contribution, was developed as a foundational survey course to introduce students to the field of endangered language documentation, conservation, and revitalization, with a particular focus on the needs of speakers of Indigenous languages. Emerging in response to student interest and the university's growing awareness of its responsibility in the context of changing Indigenous-settler relations, FNEL 180 engages students in the critical study of the intersecting cultural, historical, social, and political factors that impact language loss, retention, and revival. Through the thirteen-week course, students learn about and explore the many diverse strategies and practical methodologies used in collaborative, interdisciplinary, community-based documentation and revitalization projects for First Nations and Indigenous languages. From September to December 2020, necessitated by the pandemic, the course met twice a week over Zoom, richly supported by the Canvas online learning management system (LMS). Doctoral student Daurio served as the teaching assistant for this course. This co-written reflection is a product of our joint work rescoping the course for online delivery and our shared experience of teaching in a digital classroom.

In the process of drafting this contribution, co-author Turin—the instructor of record for the course—reached out to the relevant associate dean in the Faculty of Arts as well as to the research ethics coordinator in the UBC Office of Research Ethics to discuss the ethical implications of publishing a reflection on our experience of teaching this course. While neither the Office of Research Ethics nor the Office of the Dean identified any ethical issues around including snippets from anonymous student evaluations, which both the instructor and teaching assistant received following the conclusion of the class, in our written reflection, we ultimately decided against including any direct citations. Instead, we have opted to describe student experiences and perspectives in more general terms, teasing out emerging themes while still protecting the identities of all those enrolled in the class.

Problematizing "the Pivot": Managing Mediation

Until 2020, FNEL 180 had always been delivered in person, in a campus classroom on UBC's Point Grey campus, situated on a promontory at the western edge of the University Endowment Lands overlooking the Pacific Ocean. In May 2020, once the university administration announced that all September classes would be delivered online in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, we began thinking through the implications of remote instruction for a course that had previously involved trips to museums and community spaces, such as to the beautiful cultural centre of the Musqueam Indian Band, and had included walking tours across our own campus to make sense of UBC's multilayered linguistic landscape.

While commuting time (the commute to our campus takes faculty, staff, and students up to two hours each way on account of Vancouver's high costs of living and the relatively low level of densification within city limits), costs to students (Champagne and Granja 2021), and environmental impact would be reduced through moving to online instruction, we were concerned about aspects of the learning experience that might be diminished or even lost. How could we work to re-create some of the embodied and relational experiences of actually being together through a digital classroom? What, if anything, might be gained through a digital platform? We reject overly instrumentalized logics in which all clouds (i.e., the profound challenges posed by COVID-19) necessarily contain a silver lining (i.e., the opportunity for higher enrolments and globalized online universities) (cf. Zimmerman 2020 and Pycam 2021). Instead, in our digital classroom, following the lead of many educators who have been working in this space for much longer than us, we centred relationships of trust, compassion, and personal transformation. In this contribution, we document how all of those in FNEL 180—students, teaching assistant, and instructor—worked together to create a caring learning community as we navigated logistical, political, social and personal complexities in new ways.¹

While the social upheaval and challenges posed by the novel coronavirus global pandemic have felt historic for most of us—unlike anything that we have experienced in our lifetimes—the disruption and danger of pandemics is nothing new to Indigenous people who have suffered and survived the introduction of alien diseases, religions, cultural habits, languages, and food systems since colonization (Waterfall 2020). The use of sophisticated digital technologies for online post-secondary instruction was a new and daunting

¹ We refer readers interested in stories of pedagogical transformation to a powerful new video series of seven recorded conversations about diversity, race, and education between Tara Mayer, a cultural historian at UBC, and experienced educators across North America entitled "On Feeling and Knowing: Radical Conversations about Teaching and Learning": <https://pwias.ubc.ca/playlist/on-feeling-and-knowing/>.

experience for many faculty members and teaching assistants (Champagne and Granja 2021; Hogan and Sathy 2020), ourselves included. Meanwhile, Indigenous language learners, teachers, activists, and technologists have been harnessing analogue and digital tools to support the dissemination, reclamation, and revitalization of their languages for as long as these tools have existed, from pen and paper, through to specially modified typewriters, and now social media and the internet (Turin and Pine 2019; Galla 2016). To make our class relevant, we found it necessary to turn inward to reflect on the ways that Indigenous communities were themselves engaging in language work as they responded to the pandemic (Rosenblum 2021; Cullis-Suzuki 2020; Eisen 2020; Chew et al. 2020; McIvor, Chew, and Stacey 2020), and to centre such experiences and resources in our redesigned syllabus.

While we worked on redesigning the course through the summer of 2020, we came to see the “pivot” to online instruction as an opportunity to explore the implications of Marshall McLuhan’s oft-cited injunction that the medium is the message. Destined to be interacting entirely through online and digitally mediated platforms, we needed to explore how the communication medium itself—not only the message that it carries—might become a productive focus of our scholarly inquiry. As McLuhan noted, it is the “medium that shapes and controls the scale and form of human association and action” (McLuhan 1964, 9). Each medium, independent of the content that it transmits and mediates, is inevitably a compromise, impacting the make-up of the message in ways that are both historical and contingent. With the “Zoom room” as our designated medium and Canvas as our LMS, we were summoned to think carefully about all aspects of mediation.

In rescoping the existing course, it became apparent that the adjustments required by the pandemic provided an occasion to refresh and review the course as a whole, going beyond simply rethinking assessment rubrics and delivery formats. Even if its learning objectives were progressive and even somewhat political by the standards of our university when instructor and co-author Turin originally proposed the course, FNEL 180 adhered to a traditional format and structure. During course development and the curriculum process, Turin had in fact been challenged by colleagues and administrators on why he had resisted including a final, timed exam as a graded assignment, as would have been in keeping with other 100-level classes, and experienced resistance to including alternative assessment formats. In some ways, then, the “pandemic pivot” offered an opportunity to return to and more deeply explore the learning goals for this class.

In addition, until this year, the instructor had used the LMS in a rather rudimentary way—as a digital dumping ground for PDF documents and ancillary documents—relying instead on the twice-weekly in-person class meetings to communicate all pertinent and time-sensitive updates. We recognized that, in an exclusively online learning environment, the LMS and associated tools would need to be further developed as they would be required to do more work. Reviewing the existing assessments, we introduced a new graded element in the form of threaded discussion posts for students to respond to one another’s work and we removed points for attendance and participation, as we further outline below.

Transforming a Syllabus: From the Classroom to Zoom Room

We benefited a great deal from colleagues who, having taught summer courses in 2020, were the first to adapt their syllabi to an online format. Many of these creative instructors generously shared their experiences with others through webinars organized by UBC Arts Instructional Support & Information Technology (Arts ISIT), the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology (CTLT), and UBC Wellbeing (Bartolic et al. 2020; McPhee and Lyon 2020; McPhee et al. 2020). Over the course of several months prior to September 2020, in our capacities as instructor and graduate academic assistant, we attended eighteen different webinars and participated in two massive open online courses (MOOCs), from which a number of themes began to emerge. In an entirely online course, we learned, instructors need to think differently about how to engage students, foster participation, and assess student progress (Nordmann et al. 2020; Tobin 2020).

We also consulted guiding principles (see University of British Columbia n.d.) that had been developed from working groups comprising a hundred faculty and student leadership organizations. We learned a great deal from key recommendations that included centring compassion and care for students and making the most of the flexibilities provided by online learning while at the same time simplifying course design and streamlining delivery. Just as our university was mobilizing to help students and faculty adapt to online learning and teaching, a number of articles were appearing that offered guidance on some nascent practices to support a temporary shift to online teaching (see Cavanagh 2020; Darby 2020; Nordmann et al. 2020). These articles encouraged instructors who were new to online teaching—like us—to consider how an online format would reshape how students managed their time and engaged with course materials, particularly in asynchronous settings. From these presentations, publications, and informal conversations, we were introduced to imaginative ways for connecting

with students and soliciting their input at key points in the term as well as cautionary tales about the time that all of this extra work inevitably takes. One of the suggested approaches that we incorporated was to ask of all participants in the class—the instructor, teaching assistant, and students—to pre-record a video introduction and then watch others' videos ahead of the first synchronous online class meeting. We also conducted a mid-term survey with a follow-up class discussion to review how the course might be productively adjusted in response to the findings.

After learning about effective ways for structuring an online syllabus, we turned our attention to transforming the existing syllabus. On account of the instructor's prior commitment to the use of open knowledge and open scholarship (Turin 2019; Turin 2021), the reading materials were already either digitally accessible and/or open access. In this we were fortunate, and in fact well positioned, to build out the syllabus with existing readings and resources. We noted that other colleagues whose reading lists were primarily composed of print volumes held in physical course reserves were dealing with the additional logistical difficulties posed by the closure of university libraries and by the geographic distribution of students around the world joining online classes from different time zones.

Alongside digitally accessible readings, we wanted to foster multimodal learning (Heydon 2007) through the provision of visual and audio content with which students could engage asynchronously. Teaching assistant and co-author Daurio compiled an annotated list of short films, podcasts, and documentaries as supplementary resources that were either fully open access or available as digital streams through our university library, matching these with course modules and learning outcomes. Based on student feedback and regular references to films and podcasts in their discussion and writing assignments, these additional multimedia learning materials were well received.

We shared the restructured course syllabus with students as a standalone PDF download (for ease of viewing offline) as well as through richly hyperlinked weekly modules hosted on Canvas. We invested considerable time into designing our front-facing page on Canvas so that students would have quick access to the most critical information from a single landing page. We also created intentional redundancy in Canvas by repeating key information—deadlines in particular—and making use of hyperlinks to access both external content and other sections of the course. This redundancy enabled students to access assignments through multiple digital routes and hyperlinked pathways, since we could not predict how students would navigate through or locate content. While most students seemed to adapt fairly well to a fully online syllabus, all were grappling with the idiosyncrasies of their different instructors, who structured and located course content in different places on the LMS. Anything that we could do to reduce the cognitive burden for students, helping them to identify the readings and assignments without undue stress, was good for all. For students who were struggling, we did our best to provide individual support by emailing links to specific assignments on a weekly basis and being flexible about late submissions.

Principles for Online Teaching and Learning

To create a supportive learning environment and provide structures that would help students thrive in the midst of uncertainty and as they grappled with unfamiliar tools and technologies, *flexibility* became a central principle that informed our pedagogical approach. We adapted—we hope with some agility—over the course of the term in response to needs voiced explicitly by students as well as to needs that became apparent in other ways. It soon became clear, for instance, that some students were submitting their assignments quite late. While the original rubric developed by the instructor indicated that lateness would result in a lower grade (as is common in face-to-face classrooms), we decided to provide a generous window of leniency around submission time rather than immediately subtracting points. We also communicated that we knew that students were under considerable pressure and that we, as the instructional team, were more interested in a thoughtful response that was submitted late than a rushed assignment submitted two minutes before a deadline.

By raising these issues, we learned that many students were struggling with both physical and mental health; some were grappling with the death of a family member over the course of the term or found themselves providing care for loved ones needing extra assistance. Others were without stable internet connections—particularly in rural or remote communities—while some simply found the virtual learning environment extremely challenging and were not that comfortable navigating an online content management system from their bedrooms.

We know of some of the difficult circumstances of our students' lives because they felt comfortable communicating about them—by email or during office hours. We encouraged students who anticipated that they would be unable to submit an assignment on time to let us know in advance and to provide a reasonable date by which we would receive it. We did not ask for explanation, doctor's notes, or any other traditional forms of verification. Rather, we operated on the basis of *trust*, indicating to our students that we had no

reason for not believing them. In this way, we were able to accommodate their individual needs and cultivate a culture of open communication, showing our students that they could expect us to respond with kindness and care.

While leniency toward late assignments was only one aspect of how we approached flexibility, it was an important element that impacted many of our students at one point or another during the term. Despite the increased workload that it produced for instructor and teaching assistant, we still feel that our flexible approach, combined with the fostering of open communication channels, was an important aspect of generating a productive space for learning and was beneficial to the overall well-being of our students. While two students dropped the course in the first two weeks of term, during the add/drop window that some educators refer to as “shopping,” we were delighted and heartened that the completion rate for FNEL 180 was 100 percent, although some final projects were submitted quite late.

Responsiveness was another principle that we tried to incorporate into the structure of the course. All too often, when faced with critical feedback, we witness ourselves and others becoming defensive, pushing back against recommendations and deflecting constructive suggestions. Teaching and learning are very personal, and teachers and students alike can quickly feel judged, evaluated, and hurt. We solicited candid feedback about course structure and content through an ungraded and anonymous mid-term survey, advising our students that we would review and consider each of their suggestions, devoting time in class to responding to their recommendations and openly discussing what we could adjust and change. A specific change we were asked to make was to extend the deadline for recurring weekly assignments to midnight instead of 5 p.m., making it easier for students in different time zones, students with full course schedules, and students who were juggling many other responsibilities to turn their written work in on time. We implemented this change immediately, along with several other student requests which emerged from the mid-term survey. In response to the feedback, we began using breakout rooms to facilitate smaller group discussions around specific questions to provide students who were less comfortable speaking in front of the whole class with an opportunity for participating in a less intimidating environment. We also posted an announcement each week listing all upcoming tasks and assignments to help students better manage their time and responsibilities.

We were also guided by the principle of *accessibility* in both course design and delivery. As noted above, all reading materials were either available as PDFs through the LMS or were freely available on the internet. A number of students had specific accessibility needs that required thoughtful and customized accommodation, which included both providing technical support and individual guidance to enable their full participation in a synchronous Zoom class and offering customized modifications to assignments. Overall, it would be fair to say that there was no uniform response to the online learning environment. For many intersecting technical, social, and cultural reasons, while we were able to provide effective support to some students, finding ways for all to succeed and thrive was more challenging.

Access is a central theme in Indigenous language work. With ever more Indigenous language learners and teachers living outside of traditional territories for reasons that include colonial dislocation, employment opportunity, healthcare, and education, ensuring that communities have accessible language learning resources is a critical factor in successful Indigenous language revitalization (Daigneault 2020; Galla 2016; Maestro, Dupont, and Friesen 2019). Our commitment to accessibility as a practice and as a method was thus both a function of accommodating the circumstances of the pandemic and a way for us to model how digital resources are increasingly mobilized to support Indigenous language reclamation and revitalization (Anderson and Christen 2013; Carpenter et al. 2021; Chew 2021; McIvor, Sterzuk, and Cook 2020; Enari and Matapo 2020).

Finding the right balance between the synchronous and asynchronous aspects of the course was a new challenge for us. While one of our central goals in delivering FNEL 180 online was to create a connected synchronous learning environment, we also recognized the need to provide opportunities for students to interact with one another outside of the two eighty-minute class meetings per week. In terms of the latter, we facilitated formal and informal avenues for social interaction, one of which was a discussion thread specifically for students and the teaching assistant to post pictures of their pets. We also responded quickly to student requests to create new threads on particular emerging topics that they wished to discuss further with their peers.

Synchronous online sessions were particularly important for cultivating supportive relations and providing a productive space for critical conversation. As an instructor and a teaching assistant who are both non-Indigenous and were offering a course about Indigenous language revitalization and documentation during a global pandemic, we needed to highlight the problematic role of educational institutions in reproducing power relations, particularly in the context of the lives of Indigenous people in Canada. Using the course as an opportunity to challenge such hierarchies (Rosa 2020), we also needed to account for the

triggering effects of discussions about Residential Schools, which have played such a significant role in the violent suppression and erasure of Indigenous languages. A number of students spoke powerfully and personally of their own experiences—or those of close family members—in these institutions of state-sponsored denigration. The intergenerational trauma and lasting pain caused by Residential Schools necessitate very careful handling and engagement, and the topic is best handled in a synchronous setting in which an instructional team can respond to student feedback and concerns immediately.

Finally, before discussing the affordances of asynchronous and synchronous learning, we must note that our relatively small class size of thirty-three students provided us with additional time to monitor and accommodate the needs of individual students. The modest class size ensured that every student who felt comfortable participating in discussions had the space and time to do so, and the addition of a teaching assistant enabled the creation of a welcome and participatory classroom while also allowing the instructional team to provide flexibility around deadlines, extensive one-on-one communication via online office hours and email, and individual monitoring and support. It is unusual at most public research universities in Canada (including our own) for a teaching assistant to be appointed for a class of this size, and we acknowledge that this allocation raises important questions about time, resourcing, and sustainability, and is a privilege that many of our colleagues working at other institutions are denied. For reasons specific to the goals of the Institute for Critical Indigenous Studies, along with the experimental nature of the pivot to online teaching in response to the pandemic, we were generously supported in our request for a teaching assistant in this instance. Irrespective of any teaching assistant support, we also note that larger online classes inevitably face different challenges—the sheer number of student images in the Zoom classroom frame being one—and that the experiences we describe in this teaching reflection may be of most relevance to other small to medium-sized classrooms at well-resourced universities.

Weighing the Benefits of Asynchronous and Synchronous Learning

In terms of class structure, we settled on synchronous sessions delivered through Zoom, a video conferencing software licensed by our university and one with which we were becoming increasingly familiar. In our twice weekly meetings, the first class was generally devoted to a lecture by the instructor, followed by a group discussion, and the second to a guest lecture from a colleague or community member from within or beyond the university. All but two of the invited guest lecturers were members of Indigenous communities, and all were either provided a modest honorarium (if they were not university staff) or a gift (if they were). The instructor met with the invited guests before they visited the class to discuss learning goals, timeframes and structure, and to agree on appropriate readings or resources to accompany their presentation.

From the outset, we decided that students would be graded neither on attendance nor on participation, and we communicated this policy to our students repeatedly. Attendance was monitored for the sole purpose of following up with students who missed a number of classes to ensure that they were getting the support they needed and knew how to locate Zoom recordings of the classes once these had been posted to the LMS. In some cases, this targeted outreach helped us to better connect with students who required additional learning support and to adjust deadlines for assignments in light of challenges they faced. Despite—perhaps even because of—not grading attendance, class participation and engagement remained consistently high throughout the course as measured by the number of students who attended the twice-weekly synchronous Zoom sessions. We noted that students who attended class and also engaged in discussions—either verbally or through the chat feature—tended to produce stronger work.

Mindful of the limitations of purely digitally mediated interaction, we tried to create as supportive a setting as possible. The instructor was always present in the Zoom room five to ten minutes before the start of class to engage in informal conversation with students who arrived early. A short period at the beginning of each class was devoted to announcements and updates from the group, which ranged from personal stories (birthdays, pets, achievements, and bereavements) to social and political commentary (US elections, noteworthy anniversaries, and Indigenous activism). When students invited a family member or friend to attend a class meeting, we made our delight at their presence clear. Overall, we signalled to our students that we recognized them as full and complex individuals situated within a web of social relations—family members, housemates, and pets—and that we acknowledged that these other aspects of their lives would inevitably inform their coursework, their writing, and their participation in the class in ways that were enriching and important.

During class, we made a point to engage with students in whatever format they felt most comfortable, which ranged from acknowledging and responding to messages entered in the Zoom chat feature or via direct message—from students who were more comfortable sending private comments which they asked the instructor or TA to read out to the group—to encouraging contributions from students who felt comfortable

unmuting themselves and turning on their videos. In order to manage and monitor this amount of information, certainly when the instructor was lecturing or presenting from a slide deck, the active participation of the teaching assistant was essential.

Rethinking Assessment

In terms of assessment, the instructor avoided exams and included only one timed writing assignment at mid-term, which students completed asynchronously. A substantial aspect of the course—in terms of both time and assessment weighting—was the final project, for which students were required to prepare a presentation and thereafter submit a written reflection. At the beginning of the term, each student was asked to identify an Indigenous language that they wished to deepen their understanding of through the course. Most of the Indigenous students in the class chose their own ancestral language, while many of the non-Indigenous students chose a language spoken in the territory where they grew up or now lived. Digital resources for a number of languages that had often been chosen in past iterations of the course were provided in the syllabus to help students with their research, with the instructor and teaching assistant locating and suggesting additional resources as needed. For their final project, and building from their weekly writing assignments, students critically assessed what they had learned about their chosen language.

We opted for a flexible approach to the final project, encouraging students to develop projects that would connect with aspects of their lives beyond the classroom—what the instructor referred to as the project's "digital afterlife." Many students embraced this suggestion, designing highly creative and durable projects of which they were justly proud. One student, who works as an educator with middle school students, partnered with members of the local Indigenous community to develop math and science curricula for their classroom using the language spoken in that community. In another final project, a student completed a competitive grant application to engage in immersive study of their Indigenous language with a relative who would be remunerated for their time and expertise. In another example, two students from the same community collaborated to enrich an initiative, in which they were already involved as youth leaders, to create an outdoor summer camp that would foster engagement with their cultural traditions and Indigenous language. Other students wrote a more traditional paper or produced a video or animation, but there was a high level of conceptual sophistication in nearly all of the final projects.

We asked students to submit their final presentations in slide or video format and post them on Canvas. We then assigned two students to peer review each presentation, modelling our expectations for constructive feedback by first leaving our own comments and recommendations on each submission. Without sufficient synchronous class time to watch each presentation together, we instead proposed that the instructor, teaching assistant, and assigned peer reviewers offer oral feedback on each student's presentation during our synchronous class meetings, then give the student whose presentation had been discussed an opportunity to respond. In this flipped model, students made time outside of class to watch and review their peers' presentations, while the "live" sessions were reserved for discussion, engagement, and constructive conversation. Based on the feedback we received, this approach was much appreciated by the students.

While instructors who had taught online courses in the 2020 summer term reported receiving mixed feedback from students about the value of guest lectures in online settings, guests became a central component of the pedagogical approach for our course. In many cases, we found that the online setting actually worked better for guest speakers than an in-person class visit because it helped to break down communicative barriers, facilitated more direct interaction with students, and meant that we could invite speakers living in different locations and time zones. Drawing on his professional networks, the instructor invited speakers who could represent the diversity of the field and the interdisciplinary nature of scholarship on endangered and Indigenous languages, exposing students to much inspiring work that linked back to the goals of the course. Based on our observations and student feedback, guest speakers were highly valued by students and were an essential component in uplifting and centring Indigenous voices and experiences in a class led by two non-Indigenous teachers.

Learning from Our Learning: Rethinking Outcomes

Much of the above narrative is framed in a positive light, showcasing opportunities for course adjustments and deeper engagement with students. In so doing, we do not wish to gloss over the many significant challenges that we and our students faced or imply that delivering FNEL 180 online was without conflict or difficulty. In this concluding section, we address some of the particular challenges of the digital classroom and how we navigated these.

First, we must acknowledge the difficulty of fostering connections among students—as well as between students and the instructional team—in an online setting. The informal sociality of the everyday, face-to-face

classroom—walking up flights of stairs together while chatting, lingering outside the classroom while the previous instructor packs up their whiteboard markers, sharing a cup of tea during office hours—is lost in an online setting, and much of this cannot be replaced by any amount of intentional Zooming. This sense of disconnection and dislocation was exacerbated by persistent technical issues which dogged some of our students' participation in the course, including difficulties navigating the online course structure (resulting in confusion and missed assignments), sub-optimal hardware that made engagement difficult, and students living in remote locations grappling with unstable internet connections or sharing limited bandwidth with other family members also working online.

Yet, while the digital classroom posed significant challenges, some of its positive aspects were quite unanticipated. Under normal circumstances, our students live on or near campus in shared housing. One consequence of the global pandemic has been that more students are living at home with parents, siblings, and other loved ones and studying remotely. Even though studying from home can be distracting (and potentially frustrating), for many students the support network provided by family was central to their participation and success in the course and helped them to feel less isolated. At the same time, the shift to online learning was not experienced in the same way by all our students: although some students thrived while living at home and studying online, others did not, for reasons outside of the control of the instructor and teaching assistant.

Second, the fully digital classroom experience—in terms of attendance and assignments—provided an outlet for those students who had advanced skills in graphic design, animation, and audio-video production. When compared with previous years teaching this same course, we were impressed by the sophistication and maturity of final projects, all of which were necessarily digitally mediated. As post-secondary instruction increasingly moves away from timed exams and written assignments towards multimodal creations, FNEL 180 offered a way for students to showcase their talent and creativity through online projects.

Third, as instructor and teaching assistant, we repeatedly underscored to our students that this was our first time delivering a fully online course and that we were receptive to suggestions for how to strengthen and improve the class. Encouraging anonymous feedback in the form of a mid-term survey was critical for drawing our attention to aspects of course delivery that we could easily adjust to improve the student experience. We believe that the combination of our own inexperience in delivering digital content and our openness to suggestions for improvement helped to create a learning environment in which the hierarchy of instructor and students was somewhat (although by no means entirely) softened and even disrupted, with students reporting feeling “heard” and “listened to” in their final evaluations.

A final, and perhaps unexpected, positive by-product of the fully online classroom was that all students were positioned to interact with classroom content regardless of their physical location, notwithstanding the technical difficulties outlined above. In larger face-to-face classes, certainly in some of the older buildings on our campus, those students who sit at the back of the classroom—whether by accident or by choice—as well as students with hearing impairments or cognitive disabilities can face significant additional challenges, resulting in reduced engagement and further contributing to a sense of disconnection. While we certainly recognize that different kinds of distancing can occur in digital learning spaces (Anderson 2020), in this case, at a superficial level at least, each student had the same level of proximity and access to the instructional team. For students with specific learning needs and accommodations who may feel isolated or marginalized by face-to-face interactions, the online and live technical support offered by the UBC Centre for Accessibility—combined with the ease of recording and saving the audio, video, and chat feeds from each class for students to review later—may be an aspect of the digital classroom that contributes to wider participation and more inclusive engagement.

Overall, reflecting on aspects of the online teaching environment that were particularly productive—and which we may incorporate into face-to-face classrooms when in-person teaching resumes once again—we arrive at one central conclusion: compassion, awareness, and flexibility lead to better learning and a more positive classroom experience for all. This is no new realization, even if it crystallized for the two of us in this instance. While we believe that students deserve this level of care from their instructors at all times, and not only as an emergency measure in response to the profound challenges posed by a global pandemic, we also acknowledge the additional time and resourcing that this approach requires and note that such work all too often falls on the shoulders of racialized faculty already overburdened by institutional service requirements and underrepresented in the academy as a whole. The university systems in which we work are increasingly structured around financial models and evaluative metrics in which all of us—teachers, students, and staff—are implicated, and these models and metrics often leave little space for sincerity and kindness. We end with a simple question: what would it take to introduce a heightened level of care and a “pedagogy of grace” (Johnson 2021) into all of our classrooms?

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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