

The cover features a woman with long dark hair and red face paint on her right side. She is looking towards the camera. The background is a white wall with a faint, grey handprint. Several red circles are scattered on the left side of the cover.

Arts Education

in a

Postnational State

Guest Edited by
Madhavi Peters

UNESCO Observatory
Multi-disciplinary Journal in the Arts
Volume 6 | Issue 2 | 2020

UNESCO Observatory

Multi-Disciplinary eJournal in the Arts

Volume 6 | Issue 2 | 2020

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ISSN 1835 - 2776

UNESCO E-Journal:
an Openly Published Journal affiliated
with The UNESCO Observatory at
The University of Melbourne.

Edited and published by Lindy Joubert

Founding Director of the inaugural
UNESCO Observatory.

Email: lindyaj@unimelb.edu.au
Endorsed by the Melbourne Graduate School of Education

COVER IMAGE

'Apitaw-Picikwas' (half apple).

Artist / model:
Lana Whiskeyjack,

Photo:
Rebecca Lippiatt
2014

This was a collaboration between
Edmonton-based photographer
Rebecca Lippiatt and
art actionist / educator
Lana Whiskeyjack's alter-ego,
'Apple', in Cree, 'Picikwas'.

Cover page design:
Seraphina Nicholls

Small Steps and the Occasional Leap in Indigenizing NorQuest College

Elliott Young
NorQuest College

ABSTRACT

Reconciliation has been part of the mainstream political discourse in Canada since the establishment of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) in 2008. With the Calls to Action developed by this Commission, there has been a focus on Indigenization in post-secondary institutions across Canada. This paper will first provide a brief summary of reconciliation and Indigenization, and then explore the successes and challenges of NorQuest College (NorQuest), a post-secondary institution in Edmonton, Alberta, in its Indigenization efforts.

BIOGRAPHY

Elliott Young is Nehiyaw from Ermineskin Cree Nation located at Maskwacis, Alberta. He is the Indigenous Community Engagement Advisor for NorQuest College in Edmonton, Alberta. Elliott tries to incorporate an Indigenous worldview (based on relationality and accountability) into his role as a father, husband, graduate student and professional.

Placing Myself

My name is Elliott Young. I am a member of the Ermineskin Cree Nation, which is one of the four nations that make up Maskwacis in Alberta, Canada. My father is Cree, and my mother is Dene from Tsuut'ina Nation, which is located next to Calgary, Alberta. I have family from Louis Bull Tribe, Samson Cree Nation and from other First Nations from northeast Alberta. I am a husband and a father of two amazing children. I want to place myself within my family and relations, to establish the foundation of my teachings.

Beyond my teachings and relations, the work I have done over the past decade has focused on the engagement of vulnerable and marginalized voices in decision-making. This has been applied in sectors like homelessness, child welfare, policy and post-secondary education. The latter is where I find myself today. Currently, I am the Indigenous Community Engagement Officer at NorQuest.

NorQuest College

NorQuest is nestled in downtown Edmonton with rural campuses sprinkled in the surrounding areas. NorQuest prides itself on the diversity of its student and staff populations. Here are some of the important supporting stats, as of January 2020:

- There are 19,354 learners: 10,874 credit students, and 8,480 non-credit learners and continuing education students.
- Of the credit student population, 57% of the students were born outside of Canada in one of the 119 countries of birth identified by students. There are also 115 different languages spoken.
- NorQuest also has an older student population with the average age being under 30, and the majority (60.3%) of students being over the age of 25.

- 728 students at NorQuest self-identify as Indigenous (First Nation, Métis and Inuit ancestry), making up 7% of the student population

As diverse as NorQuest is, there are challenges and opportunities in how the institution is moving towards Indigenization. Indigenization as a concept for post-secondary institutions ‘represents a move to expand the academy’s still-narrow conceptions of knowledge, to include Indigenous perspectives in transformative ways’ (Gaudry & Lorenz 2018, p. 218). Indigenization should also be led by Indigenous people and, as much as possible, by the community. For example, Shauneen Pete shares the community definition of Indigenization at the University of Regina:

“[Indigenization] refers to the transformation of the existing academy by including Indigenous knowledges, voices, critiques, scholars, students and materials as well as the establishment of physical and epistemic spaces that facilitate the ethical stewardship of a plurality of Indigenous knowledges and practices so thoroughly as to constitute an essential element of the university. It is not limited to Indigenous people, but encompasses all students and faculty, for the benefit of our academic integrity and our social viability.”
(2015, p. 67)

Indigenization for NorQuest has its foundation in two areas: Wahkôhtowin and the TRC Calls to Action.

First, Wahkôhtowin is a Cree word meaning ‘we are all related’. The concept of Wahkôhtowin is important because it:

“ is a commitment [NorQuest] must make in our relationships with everybody and everything. Wahkôhtowin acts as our guide for life and living, and is kept alive through our interactions with students, stakeholders, community, and everything in our world. Through Wahkôhtowin, our Indigenization Strategy becomes a living document as our employees demonstrate this wisdom through our relationships. It is important for us to understand that this knowledge and way of living is not meant to be owned, but to be shared with everyone in our community.” (NorQuest College 2017, p. 2)

Indigenization at NorQuest is a strategy grounded in Indigenous knowledge and worldview. Along with this commitment, NorQuest is committed to Indigenization as laid out in the TRC Calls to Action within Honouring the truth, reconciling for the future: summary of the final report of the truth and reconciliation commission of Canada (2015, p. 319).

The TRC was established with the federal appointment of three commissioners to oversee the process that provided former residential school students and anyone affected by the residential schools legacy with an opportunity to share their experience (TRC 2010). At the end of the process, the TRC recognized reconciliation 'as an ongoing process of establishing and maintaining respectful relationships. A critical part of this process involves repairing damaged trust by making apologies, providing individual and collective reparations, and following through with concrete actions that demonstrate real societal change.' (TRC 2015, p. 16). To work towards this societal change, the TRC established its Calls to Action.

The TRC Calls to Action are in response to Canada's dark history of residential schools where the objective of taking children from their families and communities was to kill the Indian in the child. These Calls to Action provide strategic goals for various sectors, including education, on how to address the social, health, economic and educational issues that impact Indigenous people in Canada via the revival of Indigenous culture. NorQuest has committed to the TRC Calls to Action and connects its importance to Wahkôhtowin, based in Indigenous culture, as both of these issues are interconnected.

With a focus on Indigenization and diversity at NorQuest, this paper will examine the successes and challenges that diversity presents to Indigenization. First, there are great opportunities for collaboration and cross-capacity building between Indigenous students, newcomers and international students. Second, the challenge of working on Indigenization when many students don't have an introductory knowledge of Indigenous history or contemporary issues is that too many of our efforts are focused on capacity building instead of strategic initiatives. It should be stated that there are more successes than challenges at NorQuest; however, due to scope, these will be the two identified in this paper for no other reason than I feel they are priority.

Successes

With a diverse student population that includes Indigenous, newcomers and international students, NorQuest presents a great opportunity. There is potential for each student group to learn more about each other and build each other's capacity to engage with their communities better. For myself, it has been such a privilege to learn more about newcomers and international students through my experiences as a guest instructor and the events that occur on campus, such as events during Black History Month.

For Indigenous and international students, there are opportunities for building relationships with each other, such as pancake breakfasts hosted in the Indigenous Student Centre for international students. The pancake breakfasts were started as a way to bring international and Indigenous students into the same space to foster dialogue between the two student groups and work towards better relationships.

As this is a new initiative, there is a need for us to gather feedback from the students about how this is working.

What makes this cultural exchange possible is the development of the Indigenous Student Centre located in the newly built Singhmar Centre for Learning. The Centre was built with cultural considerations in mind, such as exhaust fans for ceremonies, and the ceremony space within the Centre is built in a circle with a seven-point star to reflect each sacred Cree teaching. Other features are the inclusion of a kitchen, which is used often, because there is nothing better to bring Indigenous students together than feeding them. The Centre also has office space for two student advisors, a program coordinator, a student employee, the manager, a cultural advisor, a knowledge keeper and me.

NorQuest has focused its Indigenization strategy on ensuring Indigenous people are hired and lead the work of Indigenization within the institution. Later, I will explain why this is so important.

Building a space for Indigenization needs support and action from all fronts, and senior leadership plays an important role. Under the leadership of former President Dr Jodi Abbott, Indigenization was a priority for the past several years. Following Dr Abbott's lead, the NorQuest's Board of Governors requested that one of their board retreats be located in one of the First Nations located in the regional stewardship area. Enoch Cree Nation, which is located directly west of Edmonton, hosted the board retreat in the summer of 2019, and an Enoch Elder led the board and executive leadership in land-based learning. Land-based learning takes participants on the land to learn about relationality with the environment and animals. As a result of this board retreat, Enoch Cree Nation engaged in discussions with NorQuest to develop a new campus on-reserve located in the old Enoch elementary school. A memorandum of understanding was signed in November 2019 outlining the expectations of the relationship and project.



Figure 1:
Pow-wow drummers from Treaty 6 Territory in Alberta, Canada sing an honour song in the opening ceremony for the Land-Based Learning Symposium held at NorQuest.
Elliott Young
2018

There is a considerable body of work on Indigenizing the academy that NorQuest can draw from to guide the institution moving forward. For example, the University of Alberta is going to include Indigenous knowledge in an innovative way via the work of Dr Rob McMahon (2019), who looks at using augmented reality as a tool to share Indigenous teachings and stories attached to a monument. Taking my cues from that initiative, I am currently working on something similar with NorQuest, where we have a wall of portraits of the Elders that have worked with NorQuest. My hope is to have QR Codes beside each portrait, which share a story of each Elder or a story shared directly from the Elder. For the incorporation of land-based learning and experiential learning, we can look at the work of Kato (2018) in Hawai'i, who has infused the concept of Kuleana (responsibility) into her curriculum with the guidance of Indigenous knowledge keepers. NorQuest has begun the work of incorporating land-based learning into its curriculum, and in November 2018, hosted the Land-Based Learning Symposium, which saw over two hundred participants and presenters from across Canada and beyond.

To Indigenize research conducted by NorQuest faculty, we could look at how Wilson and Nelson-Moody (2019) in British Columbia have been able to develop a 'potlach methodology' that uses land-based learning to establish holistic truth and reconciliation engagement for diverse classrooms, drawing from traditional ways of knowing in the two authors' Indigenous communities. NorQuest has taken preliminary steps in developing its own policies when engaging in research with Indigenous communities. Styres et al. (2010) found that creating an ethical space within academia allowed for Indigenous researchers to 'walk' in two worlds: both the academy and their community. This ethical space is important and one that NorQuest recognizes as we begin work on bringing Indigenous staff and faculty together to build community and overcome issues together. It is Wahkôhtowin in action.

The burden shouldn't fall entirely on Indigenous people. Non-Indigenous staff and faculty need to be involved, which is what Yeo et al. emphasize in *Unsettling Faculty Minds: A Faculty Learning Community on Indigenization*. '[O]rganizers [of Indigenization] must ... remain diligent to ensure that the work of Indigenization remains a site of unsettling for settlers and of empowerment for Indigenous peoples and communities.' (2019, p. 39). NorQuest has emphasized the importance of non-Indigenous staff and faculty taking the lead on Indigenization when it is appropriate, such as the creation of a settler working group to develop a new land acknowledgement that promotes the need for settlers to put their words to action and requires settlers to practice reflexivity in the development of their own acknowledgement.

Progress at NorQuest has been gradual; however, there are still challenges facing this effort.

Challenges

The challenge I want to focus on is increasing the capacity of non-Indigenous students and staff to enter into discussions of Indigenization. This is achieved by increasing their knowledge and understanding of Indigenous history, contemporary issues and culture. The goal here isn't for them to be experts on Indigenous issues or knowledge, but to enter into discussions about Indigenization with Indigenous colleagues without having those Indigenous colleagues be required to justify the need for Indigenization through an impromptu history lesson. The challenge is balancing capacity building of non-Indigenous students and staff with the need for Indigenous staff to develop strategies and innovations that will move Indigenization forward.

Many international and newcomer students hear about Indigenous people and colonization for the first time during one of their lectures at NorQuest. Alternatively, they hear about how colonization has impacted Canada, and they are able to draw parallels to the country they just came from. Even with Language Integration for Newcomers (LINC) students (English as a second language students), the discussion of colonization can bring up their own experiences of colonization. The risk here is discussing colonization with newcomers who may have experienced more violent acts of colonization and the potential to trigger those newcomers. Self-care and risk mitigation is important for teaching and exploring Indigenous issues with newcomers. Adding to the complexities of teaching newcomers is the fact that many of them did not attend an Alberta elementary or secondary school — such schools are now incorporating more Indigenous and colonial history into their curriculum.

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Capacity building is important; however, there has to be a balance between capacity and innovation. There is a need for Indigenous staff to be innovative and strategic about how to indigenize or decolonize NorQuest. As discussed earlier, other post-secondary institutions have many innovative and strategic initiatives that NorQuest can draw upon. The important issue is ensuring there is space to have these discussions to get the work started.

As of September 2019, NorQuest has hired a Senior Manager, Indigenous Relations, who is now tasked with leading the innovation and strategy of Indigenization at NorQuest. This is a leap forward in Indigenization; however, this should not sit solely on the shoulders of this person, as Indigenization should be an initiative that has many Indigenous voices incorporated into it. Building Indigenization and decolonization through relations within the college is practicing *Wahkôhtowin*, which will ensure that Indigenous knowledge and worldviews are the foundation.

As much as the balancing of capacity building with innovation is a challenge, NorQuest has prioritized Indigenization to the point that there is a team whose members can lean on each other to ensure Indigenization is moving forward. To have Indigenous colleagues with whom you can share successes, challenges and vent about the challenges of Indigenization is vital to the self-care and retention of Indigenous staff. Creating a space for Indigenous colleagues to come together to build community, share insights and contribute to the discussion of Indigenization is an additional method for the retention of Indigenous staff.

Conclusion

NorQuest is continually growing and excelling in recruiting students and developing programs that are meeting workforce needs in Alberta. It is exciting to be part of an organization that is consistently undertaking new initiatives and projects. There are opportunities to have one's input on projects that are outside the scope of one's work, which creates a greater sense of inclusion. Indigenization is one such opportunity.

Each staff member at NorQuest has the opportunity to participate in the Indigenization of NorQuest, which could include participating in working group sessions, pipe ceremonies, sharing circles or professional development. Accompanying this opportunity is the challenge of balancing capacity building of non-Indigenous students and staff with the ability to bring strategic innovation to Indigenization and decolonization initiatives. The college has positioned itself well in prioritizing Indigenization, by recruiting Indigenous staff to lead the work, hiring a Senior Manager to be present during broader strategic discussions within the college, and having executive leadership become allies to Indigenization. Being able to support Indigenous staff in participating in conversations to build the capacity of their non-Indigenous colleagues and students, while also being able to bring forth ideas and strategies to move Indigenization to the next level of decolonization, is a strength of NorQuest. This will continue to be a reason why I will be working and putting in the effort to Indigenize and decolonize the college. The road to Indigenization is steep, but it is best to keep moving with gradual steps and the occasional leap

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