

Title: **Bringing Indigenous Resources to the Classroom**

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Abstract

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) final report suggests that through education, new relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians can be fostered. Educators, from elementary to post-secondary, have been called to action to support reconciliation by incorporating Indigenous content into classroom learning.

Though Indigenous cultures are every so often presented as something in the historical past, they are still very present and actively contributing to Canada's cultural scene. Our mission as teachers has, I believe, two components: first, we need to acquire full awareness of a respectful understanding of Indigenous peoples and perspectives and, second, we also need to make sure that we convey it in a respectful way to the students. We also have the task of raising students' awareness of residential schools and treaties.

This is crucial so that the current situation is not perpetuated. Challenges exist, but efforts are being made to mitigate the conundrum. In line with this, I am attempting to propose a few strategies to bringing the Indigenous culture to the classroom via resources and ideas such as inviting Indigenous guests, using Indigenous Art or selecting texts written by Indigenous authors.

¹ Centre for Indigenous Studies, University of Toronto, <https://indigenousstudies.utoronto.ca/resources/>

Canada acknowledges its dark history of the treatment of Indigenous Peoples and is ready to work towards reconciliation. This is certainly not a trivial statement. Hence, a natural implication is a “Land Acknowledgement” that should be made before any significant manifestation in Canada: *“I would like to begin by acknowledging that the land I am on today is the traditional unceded territory of the Algonquin Anishinaabe People. The Algonquin peoples have lived on this land since time immemorial. I am grateful to have the opportunity to be present in this territory.”*

Reconciliation champion Senator Calvin Murray Sinclair wisely summarized what is at stake: *“Achieving reconciliation is like climbing a mountain- we must proceed a step at a time. It will not always be easy. There will be storms, there will be obstacles, but we cannot allow ourselves to be daunted by the task because our goal is Just, and it is also necessary. Remember, reconciliation is yours to achieve. We owe it to each other to build a Canada based on our shared future, a future of healing and trust”.*

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s (TRC) final report suggests that through education, new relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians can be fostered. In 2014, Ontario developed a policy framework² that calls for the inclusion of Indigenous content in the schooling curriculum. Through education, teachers are encouraged to help create the most significant shift in generational mindset.

As part of their support of the Calls to Action of the Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, school boards recognize the first week of November as Treaties Recognition Week. The goal of this week is to create greater understanding and awareness about the history and importance of treaties and treaty relationships. Many school boards have First Nations, Métis and Inuit facilitators or coordinators. It is essential to bring in Indigenous

² Implementation plan - Ontario First Nation, Métis, and Inuit Education Policy Framework - <http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/aboriginal/ofnimplementationplan.pdf>

storytellers, knowledge keepers, elders, scientists etc., so they can share their viewpoints. Teachers can also access authentic resources about Indigenous history. For example, the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation provides stories shared by survivors, films, documents and, more related to residential schools.

Teachers should also aim to provide a safe space in their classrooms. It is necessary for both Indigenous students, whose stories and contributions are “honoured as their truth,” and for non-Indigenous students who may feel uncomfortable asking questions in case they are offending others to feel at ease.

However, since educational curricula are a provincial concern, what is taught in Canada varies greatly. To know what elementary and secondary level students are learning about Indigenous peoples in any given province or territory, you need to access the Ministry of Education sites and look through the curriculum. When it comes to elective courses, you also have to look at each school board to see which schools offer those courses.

Things are unfortunately not that simple...

Through my previous positions and the B.Ed. Program, informal conversations with colleagues/classmates had led me to discover that, surprisingly, many of those who were born and brought up in Canada are unaware of Indigenous cultures and histories. Some feel intimidated and fear they will say or do the wrong thing. Others have difficulty finding, interpreting and using Indigenous curricular resources. Even worse, I found that many people still have stereotypical prejudices against the Indigenous population. As shocking as it may sound, I have heard things like *“I have not done any European history school because it was always about Indigenous*

history” or “I have no clue what a residential school is” or “Well, aren’t Indigenous Peoples lucky not to pay any taxes and have everything for free?”

Besides, it is widely acknowledged that white educators are often the ones who teach Canadian History, and many often neglect to include Indigenous perspectives. This, unfortunately, illustrates that there is a lack of representation and acknowledgment of Indigenous history, voice, and contributions, which strongly emphasize the societal oppression of Indigenous peoples.

There is a lot of work to be done. As responsible educators, we do not want students to complete their schooling and go on to post-secondary education, knowing very little about Indigenous peoples in Canada, which is an integral part of our country’s history. Otherwise, we will just perpetuate this offence!

So, how do we do this? How do we know what the right thing to say is?

The belief that Indigenous knowledge should be constrained to Indigenous Peoples is erroneous. Students everywhere can benefit from rich learning experiences integrating learnings from Canada’s First Nations, Métis and Inuit.

As a non-Indigenous educator and a newcomer to Canada (6 years ago), I am quite anxious about integrating Indigenous content into my classroom meaningfully. I find it to be a challenging task, and I frequently think about the best practices/ways of how to incorporate Indigenous resources in the curriculum as reflexively as I do with Western culture resources. I believe that by doing so, it’s a way to normalize the inclusion of Indigenous content to make it part of the student’s everyday life. Therefore, as an educator, I need to have a reconstructionist approach to education. I certainly believe that courses about Indigenous culture need to be made compulsory at every

level from elementary to postsecondary because there are too many laypeople who are uneducated about Indigenous history.

It is crucial when teaching Indigenous ways of knowing to understand that it is part of the past, present and future. Sometimes we have a diverse classroom, where students come from all over the world and have their own history and cultures celebrated in their own home. We need to make them understand that although the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada does not apply to every student, the future of Canada does! Students will be able to utilize this knowledge to be active citizens in society. I acknowledge that Indigenous history is hard to understand for newcomers (as it was for me), and maybe some students find it difficult to relate to it. Still, I understood very quickly that it is a huge part of Canadian history and very relevant to Canadian culture.

As a student teacher, I find it crucial that we learn about Indigenous History and values to convey them appropriately to the students. I had several significant experiences that genuinely transformed me as a teacher. For example, I enjoyed the Indigenous Walk (conducted by Jaime Morse) through the city, which was a fantastic experience for me when I moved here. It would be a distinctive way for students to see Ottawa. Students must see this city in a different light and learn about its history. They need to understand why it is important to acknowledge that we are on unceded Anishinaabe territory and know more about the oppression and cultural genocide the Indigenous People of Canada endured. They also need to be aware of how money and greed can lead to the indigenous loss of land, life, and culture.

Additionally, last year, a classmate and I thought we would reach out and get involved with a community organization. Thus, we went for a beading session held in Orleans by an Indigenous group, and through that session, we learned so much just by talking to the people present there. It was the first time I learned about smudge, and the critical role beading plays for Indigenous people.

I realized that a vital part of learning and teaching is to recognize where the teaching comes from. According to Charlene Bearhead, Education Lead at the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation (NCTR), *“If you’ve been to a powwow, you don’t have to bring one of the dancers back to share it. You can talk to people and then come back and share what that experience was for you.”*³ She also adds: *“It’s a basic protocol of asking Elders in the communities, ‘Can I teach this and how do I teach this?’”* Nowadays it should be even easier to do as most school boards have an Indigenous Resource person to help teachers achieve that.

Beware of “cultural appropriation”!

The topic of cultural appropriation is sensitive. I had never heard of it until last year when I was teaching in an independent school in Toronto. I decided to play a movie called *“The Legend of Sarila”*⁴ about three young Innuits who set off searching for a promised land to save their clan from starvation. I was asked not to show the movie because of the risks of cultural misappropriation. I was baffled by the fact that the administration thought it was not proper. I did not understand what I was doing wrong and thought people did it all the time. When enlightened by the specialist of Indigenous culture at the school that cultural appropriation also referred to a group of people belonging to the dominant culture taking elements from the culture of people who have been oppressed by that dominant group, and sometimes even misinterpreting it, it made more sense to me. I decided that because I did not know much about who made the movie, I did not think it was appropriate to show it to the students. (I later found out that the person who made it was not indigenous and did not have any indigenous roots and was glad I did not show the movie

³https://cdn.we.org/wpcontent/uploads/2015/08/INDIGENOUS_Guide_20161018_FINAL_V4_Nov_15_WEB.pdf?_ga=2.220914584.1827911204.1496344465-293041782.1492118223

⁴ <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt2296935/>

to the students). It is paramount to find out before showing a movie or designing a lesson where the resources come from, who was it designed by and whether you can use it in a classroom environment. Questions like these are key, is it sacred? Is it part of a religious belief? Am I disrespectful to that culture? Do I have enough knowledge to talk about it?

Bringing Indigenous resources in my classroom...

As a teacher, I believe it is vital to set the classroom tone during the first month of school by talking about Indigenous ways. It can be woven into the curriculum, giving students some context, history, and expectations of what they will be learning over the year. As a kickoff activity during the first few days of school, teachers can conduct a survey using Google forms, for example, about how much the students know, and then have the class work together to compile a list of things they think are important in Indigenous education and refer to this list for the rest of the year. If students are not comfortable asking questions in class, sites like SLIDO can be used for that purpose as it's completely anonymous.

I also think it is crucial to teach students to be precise when pronouncing words belonging to the Indigenous languages. It is, after all, a sign of respect to do so. We need to educate the new generation about this part of history and help them eliminate the biases they have that may have been transmitted by their parents/grandparents. Having empathy is part of being a decent human being. And when we teach kids about history, no matter how hard it is for them to understand and accept, we are aiding them to have compassion.

There are so many activities that we can do with our students that relate to Indigenous cultures, like learning about the importance of Wampum belts. Explaining how Wampum belts were a symbol of peace between the Indigenous people and the people who sailed overseas to inhabit the

Indigenous Peoples' land. The Belts represented a bond, a friendship, and a commitment between the First Nations peoples and the European settlers. The discussion can be centred around whether those treaties were respected. Some of the culminating tasks that I have thought of are:

- Creating a class Treaty of rules and expectations for the school year.
- Students use graphing paper to design their own Wampum Belt that symbolizes the classroom Treaty's upholding.
- Explore the technology available at school to create a digital Wampum Belt.

Another significant topic to touch is residential schools and their purpose. For example, I will need to talk about assimilation and how Indigenous students were forced to attend residential schools to destroy the indigenous in them by stripping them of their language, religion, tradition, and culture. Depending on the grades I am teaching, I will also need to talk about how these children faced physical, emotional and sexual abuse.

As an extension of that, students can also be asked to research and compare Canadian (Eurocentric) society values with traditional Indigenous values.

I will also teach about Turtle Island, the importance of the Land and rituals and the Seven Grandfather Teachings. Based on my conversations with my peers, I get the feeling that Indigenous education within the Canadian public-school systems is inadequate, and despite good intentions, teachers have difficulty teaching Indigenous studies. It is, therefore, vital that future educators have adequate preparation and materials for teaching about Indigenous Peoples. Here are some ways to indigenize your class:

- Through storytelling, songs, oral tradition
- Highlighting the importance of observation, silence and listening

- Explaining the holistic approach that Indigenous people have and how, for them, there are connections between all things and beings.
- How Earth is part of their being and cannot be separate.
- Using the Land as pedagogy. Incorporate the land into teaching.
- Use indigenous resources, art and culture in the classroom.

Where I need to work on are my strategies to develop a relation with indigenous students (if I have any in my classroom). Some of the strategies I have thought about are:

- Getting to know them (on a more personal level, i.e. family, culture etc.)
- What are their strengths and weaknesses.
- Have more one-to-one conversation with them.
- Always seek to understand first.
- Ensure they receive the same learning opportunities.
- Incorporate famous Indigenous Peoples and use them as role models.

Concluding remarks

I realized that when it comes to Canada and representations of the Indigenous people here, several myths exist. Debunking those myths and identifying that they are false or biased is imperative. If non-Indigenous people in Canada engage in sincere and respectful conversations with Indigenous Peoples, and they try to become better educated about Indigenous issues, we can all move together towards a better Canada!

I believe that there is so much that can be changed through teaching and learning in our schools; I admit that the subject matter is complicated and that it can make many people uncomfortable, but it is of the utmost importance to unpack and exchange.

Some Useful Websites as Resources for Educators

From the Government of Canada

- **Aboriginal Arts, Cultures and Heritages**
<https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1100100012788/1100100012792>
 This Government of Canada website on Indigenous and northern affairs offers a plethora of resources and information on a vast array of topics including Aboriginal history in Canada, Aboriginal arts, reconciliation as well as educational resources targeted at younger students.
- **Kids' Stop**
<https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1315444613519/1315444663239>
 This section of the website proposes activities, games and stories for young students regarding Indigenous cultures, histories and languages.
- **Publications Catalogue from the Crown-Indigenous Relations and Northern Affairs Canada (CIRNAC) and the Indigenous Services Canada (ISC)**
<http://pse5-esd5.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/pubcbw/publication/catalog.aspx?l=E>
 This section offers publications on a variety of topics, most notably of educational resources such as the resource found below. There are resources available for all ages and are also available in French for any French immersion teachers.
- **The Learning Circle: Classroom Activities on First Nations in Canada**
https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/DAM/DAM-INTER-HQ/STAGING/texte-text/ach_lr_ks_lc1214_1331134340172_eng.pdf
Applicable to: Math, Science, Arts, ELA, FLA, Social Studies, Indigenous Studies; Primary and Secondary School.

From the Government of Ontario

- **The First Nations and Treaties Map**
<https://www.ontario.ca/page/ontario-first-nations-maps>
- **Backgrounder on Treaties in Ontario**
<https://www.ontario.ca/page/treaties>
- **The Ministry of Indigenous Affairs**
<https://www.ontario.ca/page/ministry-indigenous-affairs>

Others

- **Revised report card: Provincial and territorial curriculum on Indigenous Peoples - KAIROS Canada:**
<https://www.kairoscanada.org/what-we-do/indigenous-rights/windsofchange-report-cards>
- **The First Nations and Treaties Map of Ontario: Information for Educators**
<http://www.edugains.ca/resourcesCurrImpl/OntCurriculum/InfoEducatorsTreaties.pdf>
- **Aboriginal Literature in Canada: A Teacher's Resource (2017) Resources for Rethinking.**
<http://resources4rethinking.ca/en/resource/aboriginal-literature-in-canada>

This resource “consists of narrative comments along with the annotated bibliographies and related readings, explanations, interpretations and suggestions for six different Aboriginal cultures. The six cultures are Mi'kmaq, Mohawk (Six Nations), Anishnabe (Ojibway), Cree, Metis and Okanagan. The Inuit culture has a few anthologies listed,”

- **Math Catcher: Mathematics Through Aboriginal Storytelling**

<http://mathcatcher.irmacs.sfu.ca/>

“The Math Catcher Outreach Program in the classroom to encourage elementary and high school students to recognize how math is used in everyday life and how it forms the basis for many of our daily decisions and life-long choices. We use storytelling, pictures, models and hands-on activities to encourage young people to enjoy math and to help dispel myths that math is boring and abstract” (Jungic, 2017). This resource targets all students, not just those of Indigenous descent. However, much of the content is available not just in English but Blackfoot, Cree, Halq'em'eylem, Heiltsuk, Hul'q'umi'num', Hux-ay- aht, Nisga'a, Sliammon, and Squamish as well.

Applicable to: Math; Primary and Secondary School.

- **Canada 150: Contemporary Indigenous voices (2017) Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.**

<https://curio.ca/en/collection/canada-150-contemporary-indigenous-voices-2410/>

- **Developing a sense of place through native science activities. Knapp CE. (2010) - Green Teacher (88: 36-40).**

<http://ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/login?url=https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.lib.ucalgary.ca/docview/347606276?accountid=9838>

- **Deepening knowledge - Resources for and about aboriginal education: Infusing aboriginal content and perspectives into your teaching practice. (2017) Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, University of Toronto.**

http://www.oise.utoronto.ca/deepeningknowledge/Teacher_Resources/Infusing_Aboriginal_Content_and_Perspectives_into_Your_Teaching/index.html

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https://cdn.we.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/08/INDIGENOUS_Guide_20161018_FINAL_V4_Nov_15_WEB.pdf?_ga=2.251501446.1614365090.1510773933-449789498.1510773933
- **A Teacher Resource for Agonistic Dialogue in the Classroom in the Pursuit of Reconciliation in the Canadian Context – *Abigail Martin***
<https://www.scribd.com/document/450481104/reconciliation-in-the-classroom-1>
- **Calls to Action (2015) *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada***
http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf
- **Chelsea Vowels' interview (2018) *Faculty of Law – University of Alberta***
<https://ualbertalaw.typepad.com/faculty/2018/03/an-interview-with-chelsea-vowel.html>
- **Chelsea Vowel's page on *Huffpost***
https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/author/chelsea-vowel/?guccounter=1&guce_referrer=aHR0cHM6Ly93d3cuZ29vZ2xlLmNvbS8&guce_referrer_sig=AQAAAMyVv7ufi5ncv7EfzpHTlmgQIZJ-GGijf5kvT3W9UzhLrDQzcsdbSOJgskXjOwLCsHPMuv-QHF4t3pG_gISVQi9GSEsrySpCXJAEEn0JaTUIHnII05m6jQvSUw8ezRj-MJ8znEYnnccegcUfPglS2GklguGRVJy-W8YJi6h2ZQV1e
- **Indigenous Education: A Teacher's Toolkit - Education 530 Indigenous Education Section 31 (2018) *Carrie Poissant***
<https://www.scribd.com/document/398606492/educ-530-lt4-artefact-learningcircle1>
- **Truth and Reconciliation in YOUR Classroom (2018) *EdCan Network***
<https://www.edcan.ca/articles/truth-reconciliation-classroom/>
- **What matters in Indigenous education: Implementing a Vision Committed to Holism, Diversity and Engagement - *People For Education***
<https://peopleforeducation.ca/report/what-matters-in-indigenous-education/>