

### **The Metamorphic, The Subtle and The Awkward: Three Thoughts on Indigenization**

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#### **Abstract**

This paper highlights three occasionally overlooked aspects of Indigenization: the metamorphic, the subtle and the awkward. First, the author discusses how an epistemological shudder arising from the tension between Indigenous and non-Indigenous ways of knowing is an essential first step toward Indigenization. For the author, our Indigenization journey must begin by changing our minds and hearts. Second, the author draws on his own teaching experience toward a discussion of the subtle ways in which Indigenous knowledge can be integrated into existing lessons. The author argues that Indigenization does not have to be ostentatious as long as it is authentic. Finally, the author concludes by drawing on settler-educator Sheena Koops' (2018) concept of the "awkward ally." Koops' awkward ally is someone who is not afraid to look silly or be proven wrong about something in the pursuit of allyship with Indigenous peoples. Whereas faculty, staff and students can sometimes be incapacitated by uncertainties or a lack of knowledge, Koops' concept of the awkward ally reminds us that it is okay to make mistakes as long as we are willing to learn from them. The overall message of this paper is that if we want to Indigenize our teaching, we should start with ourselves and be unafraid to make mistakes.

**Keywords:** Indigenization; Allyship; Reconciliation; Transformative learning; Curriculum studies

#### **Introduction**

In the past three years, I have made several presentations at the AAU teaching showcase on the interrelated topics of Indigenization and reconciliation. In 2016, I spoke about the importance of taking action in Indigenization and of learning by doing— or experiential education — concerning integrating Indigenous knowledge into curricula (Downey, 2016). Last year, I focused on listening with one's heart as a small but potentially transformative practice in relating and working with Indigenous people and students more broadly (Downey, 2017). My intent in these presentations and papers has been largely to stimulate thinking about integrating Indigenous knowledge into the post-secondary classroom and to encourage settler folk to engage with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) calls to action (TRC, 2015) in their daily personal and professional lives. Since my first presentation in 2016, many more people have become concerned with how to be a good ally to Indigenous people and how to appropriately integrate Indigenous knowledges into the curriculum or classroom. Here, I continue the project of my earlier presentations and papers with the AAU teaching showcase toward reconciliation, Indigenization and honouring our treaty relationships in post-secondary education. Specifically, I would like to add three thoughts on Indigenization that I think are often overlooked: the metamorphic, the subtle and the awkward.

## The Metamorphic

When I talk to settlers about doing Indigenous research, I often quote Catherine Martin's advice to me when I started my master's thesis: Start with your own story. In research, starting with your own story allows for transparency about how and why you come to the research. It also helps to build a relationship with the reader. Teaching, for me, starts with learning; changes to our teaching radiate outward from the things we learn within ourselves (Downey, 2017). The metamorphic truth of Indigenization is that it starts with personal change. The kind of personal change to which I am referring here has been alluded to and described by a number of educational theorists. Curriculum theorist Dwayne Huebner (1984), for example, writes about the presence of the stranger, which can refer to anything or anyone outside of ourselves. We fear the stranger because its existence asks us to call into question pieces of ourselves. Thus, for some, the learning act, when it is thought of as more than just the transfer of knowledge and more akin to defining who you are in relation to others, is an inherently fearful act (Christou in Christou & Wearing, 2015). There are many ways to view these educational events. Personally, I like to think of these internal changes as epistemological or ontological shudders, the embodied "ah ha" moment, that arises from holding two ideas in tension (Charteris, 2014). For many of us, the transition to valuing Indigenous knowledges in our classroom first requires an epistomological shudder. We need to stand in the presence of the stranger and be changed by what they say/do/are. In more practical terms, Indigenization starts with our own experiences of Indigenous ways of knowing, history, culture, and language and the tensions that arise in that learning. The Wolastoqey word often used to refer to reconciliation is *piluwitahasuwawsuwakon*. It was brought forward by Elder Imelda Opolahsomuwehs Perley (D. Perley, personal communications, April 15 2019) and means "allowing your thinking to change so that action will follow in a good way toward truth" (Pye, 2018). This term honours the personal learning — and indeed the personal decolonization — that needs to happen before we can act. Without that transformative personal experience and accompanying self-reflection our actions may not come from a true belief, but rather an external pressure, and the result will be conflicted at best.

## The Subtle

In 2018, I taught a group of B.Ed students a course on integrating music into their classrooms. I started one class the same way I started my elementary music class. I led the students through a warm up: rubbing our hands together to produce energy and literally warm them up and then putting the energy into our eyes, ears, mouths, hands, legs, minds and hearts. At each stage, I asked students what we use those body parts for in music and in life. I then asked the students to describe the interdisciplinary elements of the activity. Some pointed out the links to science: friction and parts of the body. Others pointed out how you could use it as a language-acquisition activity. Few realized that what I was doing was leading them through a smudge; as you can imagine, that realization led to more than a few epistemological shudders and the resulting conversation was rich and thoughtful.

The point of the activity, and my sharing it here, is to show that Indigenization does not have to be ostentatious as long as it is authentic. Sometimes it can feel like Indigenization and reconciliation is an issue for governments and university presidents. The wording of the TRC's calls to action are certainly aimed at governments, perhaps because of the document's national scope. There is, however, always a particular local specificity to these kinds of national discourses. In the case of the Atlantic region, the local reality of reconciliation and Indigenization is codified in the Peace and Friendship Treaties and in the notion that we are all treaty people. That means each of us is in some way responsible for upholding the spirit of our treaties: peace and friendship. In the more specific context of post-secondary education, we all have a role to play in educating the next generation about their treaty obligations, regardless of

whether we are a contract academic instructor working with pre-service elementary teachers around the fundamentals of music or a full professor of law teaching a research seminar. Having said that, in my opinion small-and-authentic is better than big-and-fraudulent where integration is concerned. My warm up exercise with the students in my music course took nothing away from their music education—they still learned about dynamics and body rhythm—but it did add a rich discussion about Indigenous people and tradition. From my perspective, classroom Indigenization can be ostentatious but it doesn't have to be if it comes from a real understanding of our culture, language and history.

## **The Awkward**

Settler educator Sheena Koops (2018) has put forward the concept of an “awkward ally” in order to describe her attempts at authentic allyship with Indigenous peoples. While working with an Elder and a group of students around treaty education in Saskatchewan, Koops wrote a song meant to engage her Indigenous students in thinking about treaty (Koops, 2015). She shares that when she was not receiving the respect she felt she deserved, she showed anger toward the students in her class and asked them to be respectful of what the song meant to her. She also shares a few other instances where she was less than graceful in her attempts at allyship. In talking about these moments with the Elders, Koops was taken with the direct corrections she was given but also with the acceptance and forgiveness. Within many Indigenous worldviews teaching is never based in shame, competition or negativity the way it can sometimes be in Western education. The Elders with whom Koops worked were able to disrupt the behaviours while still accepting the person. This leads Koops to talk about the value of being an awkward ally.

In essence, for the awkward ally, it is better to try and make mistakes where Indigenous allyship is concerned than to be paralyzed by a fear of getting it wrong. It is better to be an awkward ally than to be immobilized by the fear of being perceived as biased; abstinence is not impartial, it is a continuation of the erasure upon which settler colonialism is built (Tuck & McKenzie, 2015). The awkward ally is someone who is not afraid to look silly or be proven wrong about something in the pursuit of allyship with Indigenous peoples. Faculty, staff and students can sometimes be incapacitated by uncertainties or a lack of knowledge, particularly around Indigenous ceremony or cultural protocol. The concept of the awkward ally reminds us that it is okay to make mistakes so long as we do so with good intentions and we are willing to learn from those mistakes. For me and several of the faculty with whom I work, the concept of the awkward ally has given us permission to try new things but also reminds us of the importance of revisiting those things to ensure we have done right by them.

As with the other thoughts discussed here, there are some important caveats to the awkward ally idea. First is the idea that all of this happens in relationship with Indigenous people—that is the “ally” part; without that you are just awkward. The other caveat I might add is that allyship is not solely about trying new things; rather, there is a strong element of being accountable for your mistakes and trying to learn from them. In that way, the awkward ally is someone who is working from an Indigenous perspective on learning—an experiential one, yes, but also a reflexive one steeped in a deep and intuitive understanding of the importance of relational accountability (Wilson, 2008) or ethical relationships such as those codified in the Peace and Friendship Treaties.

## **Conclusion**

In this brief paper, I have highlighted three thoughts on Indigenization which I consider to be often overlooked: 1) Indigenization starts with ourselves, 2) It does not have to be ostentatious as long as it is authentic, and 3) it is okay to be awkward in doing it. The metamorphic, the subtle and the awkward.

These three thoughts should in no way be meant to encapsulate the entirety of reconciliation nor the project of Indigenizing post-secondary education. Indeed, my own writing on the subject would point to the considerable complexity embedded in either task (Downey, 2016; 2017). In addition, each of these thoughts should be understood in the context of the much larger philosophical and pedagogical traditions inherent to Indigenous (L'nu, Wabanki) culture. As it is with nature, no one thought can be read independently of its relationships. As such, I hope this paper serves as an invitation into what Huebner would call the presence of the stranger, for it is only through engagement with ideas, people and practices which are beyond the limits of our own experience of the world that we can outgrow the invisible walls of misunderstanding that keep us from one another.

Wela'lioq,

M'sit No'kmaw

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