

## The Importance of Creating Networks of Support: Facilitating Inclusion & Decolonization

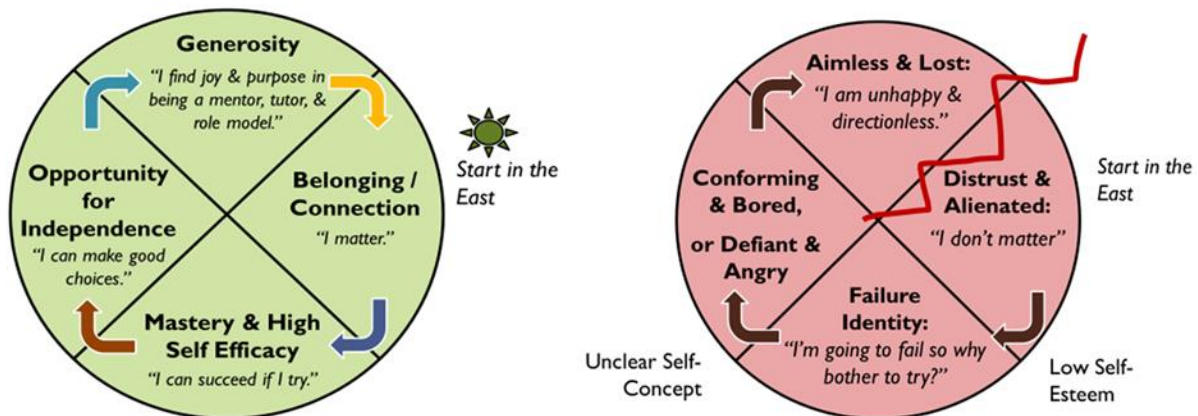
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### Abstract

Beginning in May 2023, three CBU professors each began two-year teaching chair positions: Dr. Mazumdar focusing on Culturally-Responsive Learning, Dr. Schmidt on Allyship & Decolonizing Educational Practice, and Dr. Whitehead specializing in Flexible Digital Instruction. Some interesting and unexpected areas of overlap between and across their respective focuses are beginning to emerge, which were expanded on in the AAU presentation.

**Key words:** Decolonizing Education, Culturally Responsive Teaching, Digital Learning, Inclusion in Higher Education, Circle of Courage Model

Heather began by highlighting the importance of facilitating inclusion and decolonization within academia by spotlighting the theories of non-Eurocentric academics, such as the Circle of Courage model created by Lakota Psychologist Dr. Martin Brokenleg which is based upon mainstream psychology and medicine wheel teachings:



Before a person is capable of mastering difficult skills/South, Independence/West, or Giving back to society/North, a person must first have a strong sense of Belonging/Connection/Inclusion (East) (Brokenleg & Van Bockern (2003). A sense that "I matter" because I am supported by community that sees me, values me and respects me. This support gives a person the confidence to persist when difficulty is encountered. In contrast, the broken circle depicts how mastery of difficult skills can be nearly-impossible if a person is in an environment where they feel alienated, alone and like there isn't anyone they can depend upon.

When facilitating inclusion in post-secondary institutions, decolonization is critical; the long-standing Eurocentric academic norms (of individualism, competition, and hierarchy) seem to alienate and exclude SO many people, from Indigenous students, international students, Black/African-Canadian students, neuro-diverse students, first generation students, etc. According to Mi'kmaw academic Dr. Marie Battiste, decolonization is a 2-part process of first critically deconstructing established academic norms (i.e., learning to see limitations and flaws) followed by then reconstructing academia in new, creative, exploratory ways that draw upon a diversity of cultural norms for teaching and learning. For example, Indigenous pedagogies include talking circles, storytelling, land-based learning, etc. The Mi'kmaw skill of Etuaptmunk (or Two-Eyed Seeing) reminds us to learn to simultaneously appreciate the strengths in multiple cultures' ways of knowing and generating valid knowledge, rather than prioritizing one approach (such as the Scientific Method) over others. Dr. Battiste emphasizes that what exactly will constitute and facilitate a decolonized academia is currently an unknown frontier for everyone. As such, it is crucial that we work together collaboratively. One key priority of my teaching chair involves overcoming institutional barriers to creating shared collaborative digital platforms across post-secondary institutions in Mi'kma'ki so that insights and discoveries on ways to decolonize are pooled in an online collaborative site that is easily accessible to everyone.

Bishakha's presentation drew on her personal journey as a mature international student and teaching experiences with post-baccalaureate students from across the world, along with insights from various student interactions. It shed light on the challenges international students face in higher education, drawing from current literature. These challenges encompass isolation, learning difficulties, the struggle to unlearn ingrained behaviors, lack of autonomy, and clashes in cultural values. The steep unlearning curve highlighted in literature reflects the struggle of students coming from cultures emphasizing harmony, deference, and avoidance of conflict, contrasting sharply with Western educational practices that value assertiveness and active participation (Grayson, 2023; Lu et al., 2022). This cultural divide often results in students lagging due to their ingrained tendencies to defer to authority and avoid confrontation.

Moreover, the contrasting educational paradigms in the East, where the teacher-centric approach prevails, and the West, which encourages student engagement and critical thinking, further exacerbate the struggle for international students (Trinh & Kolb, 2012). The burden of knowledge transfer primarily lies on teachers in Eastern education systems, discouraging student participation in learning design and critical analysis. This clash in pedagogical approaches burdens international students, impacting their learning experiences significantly. To address this, Bishakha proposed applying Vroom's Expectancy Theory (Swain et al., 2020), which asserts that individuals are motivated based on their beliefs about the outcomes of their actions. In the context of international students, this theory suggests that students will be motivated to improve their performance if they believe their efforts lead to positive outcomes. To implement Vroom's theory effectively, educators can focus on three key factors: expectancy (belief that effort leads to performance), instrumentality (belief that performance leads to outcomes), and valence (value placed on those outcomes). Boosting students' self-efficacy through positive mentoring and providing resources reinforces their belief in the

expectancy factor. Creating a trusting and transparent environment for grading and assessment contributes to a positive perception of instrumentality. Lastly, understanding students' ultimate goals and valence, whether mastery or performance-oriented, aids in designing a mutually beneficial learning experience.

Jessica's portion of the presentation focused on the importance of universal design and the promise of digital learning to the future of education, also drawing on her embodied experience of living with an invisible disability. With Universal Design for Learning (UDL), there is a set of curriculum design principles that allow for all students to have equal opportunities to learn (Until Learning Has No Limits, n.d.). Essentially, through using these methods we can work to minimize barriers and maximize learning for all students. In UDL, instructors develop courses and assessments that reflect on the why, what, and how of learning to achieve the goal of helping to support learners become motivated, resourceful, and goal oriented. Examples were shown of how through using UDL and authentic assessment, instructors can create scaffolded assessments to support the process of learning and help to facilitate critical thinking skills. The process of UDL is an iterative one where we are always shifting and adapting. In the digital age, instructors need to embrace new 21<sup>st</sup>-century skills that also continue to help break down barriers for learners. As Paolo Granata (2023) argues we have now entered the "Turing Galaxy," and it is essential for learners to develop partnerships with technology. Digital teaching also allows for learners to create networks with their peers, the wider community, and even globally.

Whitehead's larger project as a Teaching Chair at CBU is looking at how we can better support both learners and instructors in online and hybrid courses. Her interests are in identifying key barriers to UDL and digital design for instructors and students. Her research will focus on how we can build better support and resources. Through doing this work I hope to help create more flexible and equitable learning environments. The presentation helped to explain the foundations of the project and through both the presentation and this report to develop networks of support of other instructors doing this type of work and learn more about the communal successes and setbacks in digital teaching and learning in the Atlantic region.

We shared a brief survey with participants to reflect on our work, and we would still like to receive responses through this written report (<https://forms.office.com/r/e2YYvA8qDS>).

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