

# Reconciliation Through Student Narratives: Autoethnography, Decolonization, and Indigenous Methods-Based Assessment in Post-Secondary Education

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In the recent years since the release of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) report and its recommendations for post-secondary teaching, Canadian universities and the professors who teach in them are seeking to redefine and restructure their teaching practices, course content, and pedagogies in an effort to meet those recommendations. This involves a focus on and commitment to decolonization and Indigenization. However, many struggle with what that means in practice and how it might be executed in the university classroom. How do we teach decolonization and reconciliation? How do we develop meaningful assessments? This article considers one classroom example, an autoethnography assignment. Based in auto-pedagogy, this article examines the benefits and challenges of using autoethnography in the classroom for both Indigenous and settler students and proposes it as a pedagogy compatible with the goals of decolonization and Indigenization.

Teaching a course based on autoethnography was not a natural or obvious path for me. In fact, I struggled considerably over an undertaking that was, for me, uncomfortably outside of my own chosen methodologies. Yet, looking back, I see how my first exposure to this genre led me here. During my PhD studies, I heard Jacqueline Maurice present her autoethnographic account of the “Sixties Scoop” (Maurice, 2014). Being familiar with the history of this policy, I expected nothing especially surprising. If anything, I anticipated a more in-depth analysis of the history of this policy, as at the time, little had been published about it. However, what she presented was something quite different: an autoethnography of that policy. She shared her personal narrative as a child of the Sixties Scoop embedded in the context of the researched, historical policy. Her story included accounts of her childhood as well as later attempts in adulthood to piece together the documents that might fill in the gaps of her own disjointed history, severed by this colonial policy. I was unprepared for the impact her personal experience as a child of this policy would have on me. I did not then know the word “autoethnography,” but I would soon learn it. After her presentation, I eagerly searched for her dissertation and read every word when I found it.

At that time, I would have considered myself an empiricist skeptical of subjective narratives – particularly personal reflection, reflexivity, and even (gasp) journaling. My academic training taught me that this kind of writing fell under personal opinion, and as such, was not valid academic research. As a historian educated throughout the 90s and early 2000s, I was taught about the importance of objectivity, neutrality, and balance. While a score of literature emerging in the mid-90s as part of the postmodern shift insisted that “objectivity was a myth” (to borrow the phrase), we were taught to still strive for it – that impossible goal which, while unattainable, keeps you on the righteous path

towards truth and knowledge. Like good journalists or investigators, we were to dispassionately examine both sides of the story. That could not be effectively achieved, it was contended, if the researcher inserted themselves into the story (Carr, 2018; Haskell, 2000).

However, after hearing Dr. Maurice speak, I quickly came to appreciate the value that subjectivity could have as an Indigenous methodology. As a non-Indigenous scholar of Indigenous-settler histories, it was all too easy for me to remain oblivious to the lived realities of colonialism, even if I understood well the policies that enabled them. I had read about the Sixties Scoop policy many times, and by that point, had even taught about it. Yet, I had never understood it the way I did when Dr. Maurice connected her own personal story to it. That deeper level of understanding was something we needed more of. It was that experience that eventually led me to incorporating autoethnography as a postsecondary classroom assignment.

## Literature Review

As a faculty member in the discipline of Indigenous Studies, I often find myself grappling with constructing appropriate assignments that employ Indigenous pedagogies while still accommodating high academic standards in research and writing. I have found few answers in existing literature. While publications about decolonization and reconciliation in the post-secondary classroom are in abundance, they tend to focus on discussions around critical evaluations, pedagogy theory, teacher education, institutional policy, and the better inclusion of Indigenous students (Anuik & Gillies, 2012; CSPI, 2020; Iseke-Barnes, 2008; Schmidt, 2019; Wang, 2012). While this store of literature has been imperative to envisioning what reconciliation means and how we might begin to address it institutionally, it often fails to provide specific examples of best practices for

reconciliation in the post-secondary classroom – that is, exactly how teaching faculty are constructing assignments to meet these ends.

Yet, decolonizing activities, assignments and in-class work are essential to decolonization and reconciliation. Neither will be achieved by passive learning alone, such as by reading literature, listening to lectures, or watching videos – key as these resources all are. Decolonization and reconciliation also require active learning that engages students on a deeper level, a claim that is generally supported in current professional discussions. Education scholar Heather McGregor tells us that reconciliation in education not only involves a change of perspective and recognizing the colonial system of oppression, it also requires “engaging in activities that disrupt those structures on an individual and collective level” (McGregor, 2012, p. 22). In short, reconciliation cannot be achieved through the addition of content alone.

Here, I propose one assignment, an “autoethnography for decolonization,” which was the central focus for a senior level Indigenous Studies methodology course. This project proved a relevant example of an academic, decolonizing assignment for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and enabled them to work individually and collectively towards that goal. This paper is not meant as a step-by-step guide, but rather, as a discussion of how Indigenous pedagogies can be realized in university assignments.

This discussion is also an exercise in auto-pedagogy. Constructing and refining this assignment was part of a reflective teaching practice: a contemplation/practice cycle that encourages pedagogical research alongside its practice (Brookfield, 1995; Kolb, 1976). In undertaking this assessment, I drew from the experience of teaching this course annually over the course of three years. The repeated experience has provided me with some sound observations, albeit anecdotal in nature. I did not keep statistics or systematically compare students’ essays or responses to course material. Instead, I kept a journal throughout each of the three courses, making note usually only when something was a notable success, or a notable failure.

### **The Need for Balance**

Since my first encounter with autoethnography, I saw its potential as a tool for decolonization – both for the students who were writing it as well as an audience that might read it. In part, this was because of its capacity to engage readers with personal story. As an academic, I have always been cognizant of the need for a kind of knowledge translation: how we take academic work and make it palatable to a broader audience, and how we can root lived experience in a broader social and cultural

context through academic research (Augustus, 2015; CIHR, 2014; Graham, et.al., 2006; Straus, et.al., 2009). As the popularity of published biographies attests to, people want to hear stories about people, and personal stories can and have contributed to reconciliation (for example, Johnson, 2018; McLeod, 2018; Methot, 2019; Thistle, 2019). Although a discernable shift has taken place in the last few years, academic writing is still perceived to be unrelatable and inaccessible from student perspectives, especially to cultures whose knowledge systems are story-based (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). Moreover, it is not entirely engaging to a wider public audience – the very people to whom we would like to appeal. Even those who do engage with academic work may not readily determine the human impact of the topics under study, such as the policies of colonialism, the effects of racism, or the dislocation from home territories or culture.

However, teaching solely from an autobiographical standpoint or one of lived experience may not be the answer, either. Personal life stories on their own can easily be dismissed (and often are) by a broader public who is difficult to convince or engage – especially on the points that colonialism is collective, intergenerational, and ongoing (The Environics Institute, 2016). Asking most people to acknowledge this is asking them to repudiate the “truths” they have grown up and contradict how we as Canadians see ourselves: as just, fair-minded, tolerant citizens of a country who, while not perfect, have a better human rights record than most. An individual’s experience that refutes this belief thus becomes dismissed as an exception, an unsubstantiated personal opinion applicable only to that one, singular situation (Henry & Tator, 2006). While personal stories may generate sympathy and compassion *for the individual*, as the testimonials from the recent Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) report demonstrates, they do not necessarily change broader worldviews that are so deeply embedded in our subconscious, daily lives. The Environics survey (2016) provides a good example of this: results demonstrate an increased awareness of residential school policy in Canada and an increase in sympathy towards survivors. However, respondents remained unaware of Canada’s larger history of assimilation and the continuing effects for Indigenous peoples. Likewise, a 2018 Angus Reid poll revealed negative attitudes towards Indigenous peoples (Angus Reid Institute, 2018). These polls indicate a need for adjustments in education.

For that, we need the empirical evidence generated by academic writing. The knowledge generated in academia is essential to decolonization: to understanding the processes, ideologies, and impacts of colonialism; to deconstructing the social forces that produce and sustain colonialism as an ideology; to thinking about how we might undo them, and how Indigenous peoples might

reconstitute their places, identities, cultures, and territories disrupted through the processes of colonialism. Personal stories, as compelling as they might be, can remain disjointed from the broader forces that shape those experiences, here, referring especially to colonialism, racism, and socio-political power imbalances created by colonialism. Unless situated within a broader social, historical, or political context, there can be no understanding of the long and continuing history of colonialism and its impacts.

There are two challenges, then, in thinking about the role of academic writing in the process of decolonization: first, to appeal to a broad public; and second, to provide tangible, empirical knowledge about colonialism and its effects. Something I struggled with as I sought a way to integrate personal narrative into academic work was how to balance the two. Both are necessary to engage students and teach them critical research and writing skills, and both are necessary for decolonization and reconciliation. Thus, we require a “dual solution”: one that humanizes academia, and one that contextualizes human experience. To humanize academic writing, some psychological “transpersonal” quality is required of academic writing – what Diana Raab describes as “going beyond the personal in order to encompass a wider sense of consciousness” (Rabb, 2013, p. 2). She includes in this realm qualities such as “compassion, wisdom, intuition, mindfulness, creativity, self-awareness, and empathy.” These are qualities, I would suggest, that are potentially transformative for both Indigenous and settler populations in their decolonizing efforts. To contextualize those individuals’ stories, we must ground experience in a rigorous researched context to give it meaning beyond the individual. I believe autoethnography does just that.

### **The History of Autoethnography**

The historical roots and evolution of autoethnography as a decolonizing methodology is, perhaps, a natural progression for this genre. The history of autoethnography as a qualitative form of inquiry reaches back to the reflexive turn in anthropology, starting in the 1970s. As postmodern theory began to work its way into the discipline, anthropologists began thinking about their own subjectivity in the research process as well as the importance of “insider” reflections on their descriptions of culture (Hymes, 1972). Until that point, ethnography had largely been conducted by “outsiders” – that is, the researcher/anthropologist did not belong to the culture group under study. Moreover, anthropologists, like other social science and humanities disciplines, positioned themselves as objective observers, separating themselves from their

research processes (or at least, trying). This positionality was premised on the belief that distance from your subject made you a better researcher because of the presumed neutral, fair-minded objectivity that accompanied it. Based on the post-enlightenment scientific method that sought to identify and isolate all variables, researcher objectivity attempted to draw conclusions without bias in order to improve accuracy. But, as historians began to discover as well, researcher objectivity in the study of culture was just a myth (Novick, 1988). The topics we choose to study, the methods by which we examine them, the research we select to support them, and the interpretations we bring to those processes are all subjective and personal.

Throughout the 1980s, academics from various disciplines continued to explore the postmodern turn, thinking more about the place of subjectivity and individual interpretation in academia. Gradually, the notion of universality was abandoned, thus disrupting the researcher’s authority to observe, understand, and analyze culture from the outside. Objectivity as an exacting practice was increasingly replaced with uncovering assumptions about previously believed “truths.” Scholars eventually acknowledged their role in the research process, but this was not the “autoethnography” that would come to shape my understanding of the genre, nor the assignment I would eventually create. The earlier form of this genre did not embed author narratives into the text, but they did begin to turn to their research subjects to contribute their “insider” perspectives on cultural studies. In short, lived experience began to assume a role in academic research.

### **Postcolonial/Indigenous Autoethnography**

While initial anthropological autoethnographies were rooted in broader postmodern imperatives to admit researcher bias, the postcolonial turn was slightly different. It has been well documented in the field of Indigenous Studies how the ethnographic tradition has been based in a Eurocentric, colonial pedagogy which operates from the fundamental premise of European superiority (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, pp. 21-34). Ethnography, as a product of the post-Enlightenment tradition, was embedded in pseudo-scientific ideas of racial hierarchies, Eurocentric authority, and scientific objectivity. Experts “objectively” studied Indigenous Peoples as veritable “others,” thus privileging outsider interpretations of cultural experience and meaning at the expense of Indigenous voice and self-determination. The undertaking of ethnography was, then, necessarily an endeavour in colonialism.

Autoethnography as a postcolonial critique was a direct response and challenge to this endeavour. As Devika Chawla and Ana Patricia Rodríguez (2008)

explained,

Autoethnography may be considered the post-colonial turn that ethnography traditionally rooted in colonial discourses has taken because it centers the researcher as integral to the field. In other words, this genre has reclaimed the subject and recognized that it exists; this time the subject is the ethnographer who is really in the process of autoethnographic construction when s/he goes out in the field. (pp. 13-14)

What makes autoethnography anti-colonial, then, is its recentering of the subject-as-researcher. In doing so, the illusion of objectivity and detachment are removed from the research process: subjectivity is on display. Moreover, subjectivity is not merely “admitted”: it is hailed as something that makes research better (Battiste & Henderson, 2009; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012).

This advancement to decolonize research forefronted Indigenous stories in research. As such, autoethnography validated personal, lived experiences of colonialism and decolonization and shifted the authority over that set of knowledge, previously held by those “objective” (settler/non-Indigenous) historians and anthropologists. In these Indigenous-authored autoethnographies, the point was not to acknowledge author “bias” or subjectivity as a caveat or disclaimer, as earlier autoethnographies sought to do; rather, it was to privilege their “insider” researcher position over a long-standing tradition of “outsider” ethnographies. Indigenous scholars asserted themselves as the authorities of Indigenous scholarship, then, through autoethnography as a way of “speaking back” against ethnography. It also enabled stories as a method in and of itself, in keeping with Indigenous ways of knowing (Archibald, 2008). By the early 2000s, autoethnography could be seen as a growing, even if underacknowledged, postcolonial methodology (Houston, 2007).

Increasing attention to story as a legitimate academic method coincided with a growing Indigenous Studies discipline, an increasing number of Indigenous academics, and the apex of postcolonial theory. An increasing number of Indigenous and Indigenous Studies scholars published works that employed autoethnographic methods (e.g., Archibald, 2008; Innes, 2010; St-Denis & Walsh, 2016). By bringing personal perspectives and narrative writing into academic research, many Indigenous scholars, especially in Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand, used this approach to integrate themselves into their work in a more holistic way that better aligned Indigenous worldviews. Autoethnography enabled scholars to explore their experiences with colonialism and racism, to examine

their identities within broader social and cultural contexts, and to reconnect themselves with history, community, and culture. This brought about a new level of understanding about the lived realities of colonialism and generated accessible stories of decolonization. The effect, I would suggest, was not only a way of engaging with a process of personal decolonization: it also had the effect of decolonizing the academy (e.g., Aveling, 2013; McIvor, 2010; McKenna & Woods, 2012). Indigenous scholars were identifying themselves as if to stand up and announce, “we are here.”

If autoethnography as methodology can be appreciated as a decolonizing practice and perhaps even anti-colonial one, then the roles of non-Indigenous or settler populations is not limited to readers, witnesses, learners, or recipients of this narrative-based research. Autoethnographic approaches can be decolonizing for non-Indigenous authors, as well (Aveling, 2013). Autoethnographies can and have allowed settler scholars to articulate their own positionalities within the context of colonialism and decolonization, and to actively deconstruct their positionalities in relation to colonialism and Indigenous Peoples. The themes covered by these autoethnographies can be wide and varied, but often include reflections on “ally” positions, examinations of complicity with colonialism, adoption of Indigenous epistemes or values, and interrogating whiteness and privilege (e.g., Fitzpatrick, 2017). All these modes of self-examination can be pathways to decolonization; autoethnography can be the starting point for this undertaking.

It is thus with both Indigenous and settler, colonized and colonizer in mind, that embarking upon autoethnography can be viewed as decolonizing. I have learned through teaching experiences that autoethnography has the capacity to emerge as an Indigenous and decolonizing methodology for research, not because it is inherently or originally “Indigenous.” Rather, autoethnography can align with Indigenous methodologies in that it creates space for self-determination, expression of voice, self-reflection, acknowledgement of privilege and positionality, and personal empowerment. As Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) tells us, “Engaging in a discussion about research as an Indigenous issue has been about finding a voice, or a way of voicing concerns, fears, desires, aspirations, needs and questions as they relate to research” (p. 196). I think this is true for anyone willing to embark on this endeavour.

As a research method, autoethnographies have the capacity to more intimately engage learners in their research, to facilitate personal healing and growth, and to promote decolonization through shared and personal understandings of lived experience. In short, they allow student-authors an opportunity of self-exploration in the context of colonialism and decolonization all the while engaging in sound scholarship. It was, from my

experience, that “post-colonial spirit” from which these students, alongside Indigenous scholars of autoethnographies, have written.

### **Autoethnography Assignment**

The autoethnography I assigned was for a fourth-year senior research methods course in Indigenous Studies. I teach at a small university, meaning the class size was small. The topic for their papers was open but had to explicitly relate to a theme in Indigenous Studies. The course was constructed around three parts: (a) seminar discussions based in readings in Indigenous Studies and Autoethnography methodologies; (b) skills-based workshops; and (c) independent research and writing time and collective/roundtable workshoping.

In the first section, students read and discussed a series of articles, most of which were both Indigenous-authored and autoethnographical. In some of the assigned readings, scholars spoke explicitly about methodology in Indigenous Studies; in others, scholars implicitly used methodology to convey their topics. Many of the articles explored identity, but others dealt with major themes and debates in the discipline of Indigenous Studies or questions around decolonization and reconciliation. A key component in selecting these readings was that the content spoke directly to discipline-related themes, and that the methodology used was autoethnographic. In this way, the readings served a dual purpose: (a) to teach students about key themes and issues in the discipline, and (b) to serve as examples of autoethnography.

In the second component, students engaged in workshops to help develop specific skills that could contribute to researching and writing well. Research workshops, led by librarians, explored various research strategies specific to the students’ chosen topics. A multi-panel workshop examined questions around ethics and copyright questions. A guest lecture by an Indigenous author who wrote an autoethnography provided students with a specific example. A writing workshop addressed key writing skills expected at this level. Collective learning exercises had students deconstructing published autoethnographies in order to discern the writing formula. During this section, students continued to examine and discuss scholarly articles, all related to the session’s specific theme.

The final section had students actively work on their essays. Students continued to meet to workshop each other’s papers – an exercise that was both peer review and collective learning. In these workshops, students were expected to articulate their topics, report on their progress, and explore challenges or problems that arose as they constructed their papers. I

occasionally held in-class writing sessions, using popular writing group models such as variations on the Pomodoro technique where students would write and break in cycles (Cirillo, 2007). Students were expected to provide feedback to each other, offer suggestions, and provide the kind of support grad students or scholars might witness in small writing groups. In this way, students had structured accountability on their progress, learned how to peer review constructively (and kindly), and learned to support each other. It created a positive sense of community and a built-in support system for work that could be academically, personally, and emotionally challenging for students. It also encouraged a deep level of engagement among students as they shared their perspectives and life experiences – a process which itself can promote decolonization.

An additional key component of the entire class through all three sections was regular in-class journals. During most sessions where students met collectively, I assigned an in-class journal writing period of 10-20 minutes each. Students were provided with a question or writing prompt without explanation to write on as they interpreted. In the first part of the course, the journal exercises were specifically constructed to help them incrementally develop and refine their topics by reflecting on key events or moments in their time at university. Journal topics tended to focus on helping students identify what ultimately constituted discipline threshold concepts – the learning throughout their degrees that had a major impact on their intellectual and personal understanding of colonialism and decolonization. This component not only helped propel them through the topic-development stage of their essays, but it also served to frame the assignment as a capstone project as it prompted students to draw upon their learning throughout their entire degree and apply it in their fourth and final year. Later in the term, writing sessions gave students time to write a specific part of their paper in structured segments. For instance, I assigned a 20-minute writing period to develop an abstract. In another session, students wrote their introductions. These sessions encouraged students to start the writing process earlier in the semester than they would have otherwise – an important part of teaching students to write serious academic papers.

At the end of the term, students presented their papers to an invited audience. This was a significant moment for students, academically and personally. They presented their papers in a conference-style format. Students had to edit their papers to fit into a 20-minute window, present them in a formal, structured environment, and do so to an audience that included a wide range of guests: faculty, Elders, friends and family, and peers. The presentations not only provided them with an important academic

experience, but it also demonstrated how their work could contribute to a larger social decolonizing process. By presenting their work to a larger audience, they shared their lessons of decolonization.

### Challenges

The assignment entailed many challenges. First was the unfamiliarity with the genre. Students were learning about autoethnographies for the first time. Thus, it was unfamiliar terrain for them. First attempts often included students interpreting the assignment as one that invited them to “write their stories” as autobiographies rather than situating personal narrative within a researched context. Significant time was spent clarifying what, precisely, an autoethnography entailed.

Second was the complexity of the genre. An autoethnography essentially proposes to merge two distinct types of writing: academic and personal. Students initially struggled with this, particularly in choosing a topic that would connect the two. At first, students were uncomfortable with writing in the first person (after years of being told not to) and found it challenging to figure out how to integrate personal and academic writing.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, was the emotional challenges of this assignment. Because it is in part based in self-reflection, and because it requires students to examine their positionality in the context of colonialism – itself a painful context – the assignment was emotionally challenging. Students experienced trauma, guilt, shame, anger, and sorrow at recounting the experiences of their “colonial positionality” and hearing those of their fellow students. The potential for harm meant steering students towards topics that were emotionally manageable, something which had to be revisited constantly throughout the term. Students’ tendency was to gravitate towards topics that were (too) deeply personal to them. Helping students identify boundaries in academia, and negotiate the line between personal and private, required significant time and attention.

From my own perspective, this was one of the most challenging courses I’ve ever taught – and certainly one of the most taxing in terms of time and emotional energy. I had to remain highly engaged with each of the students throughout the term, taking careful notes on their responses, plans, and progress. Advising students individually was necessary and helpful. For instance, some students needed more prompting to find the right topic. I did so by asking a series of questions to help them identify and articulate their interests – a time-consuming task. Feedback on drafts also consumed a large portion of time, as students required more

frequent detailed comments. This level of involvement was only possible because of the small class size: most faculty would not be able to spend that amount of time with students in a larger class.

### Autoethnography as Reconciliation

When I first conceived of this assignment, I did so rather tentatively. I was uncertain if the students would see the value in the writing assignment, and thus, invest in it. In part, this was a reflection of my own uncertainties as I ventured outside of my empirical training as a historian. But I was resolved to develop an assignment that fit into both Indigenous and western standards of research and knowledge production. I was looking for an assignment that would allow students to continue their personal growth (an essential part of our department’s mission) but would also be challenging enough academically and allow them to build sophisticated research and writing skills. Undertaking a major research project at the fourth year is considered an important element of any undergraduate program for most humanities disciplines; developing that kind of an intensely academic project that would also adhere to our program goals and values was a challenge.

In the end, my anxieties were unfounded. What students produced, both individually and collectively, went far beyond any hope or expectation I had. Not only did they commit to and invest in this project, trusting me as they engaged in new and unfamiliar exercises, but they each produced works that furthered the primary goal of decolonization. There were also notable improvements in their academic skills, particularly the quality of writing and research as students found new personal connections to an academic project over which they could exercise some autonomy. It would not be out of the realm of imagination to chalk this up to the place of relevance in effective pedagogy (Frymier & Shulman, 1995).

Students witnessed and experienced the rewards of work that were both personal and professional. The empowering and transformative effects of this assignment were realized in real and lived ways, not just marked by a brief moment of relief and sense of accomplishment at the end with the final finished paper, but throughout the semester, as students gradually but perceptibly discovered, rediscovered, and articulated self-determination over their pasts and their futures. This transformative effect could be seen in the students as they worked on their essays for the weeks leading into the end of term. Each week, I witnessed students taking a step closer to finding and articulating their voices in new ways and stumbling upon realizations about themselves, others, colonialism, their families and communities, society at large, and even academia. But perhaps the most important achievement for each of

these students was their demonstration of strength, resilience, resolve, and hopefulness. Writing these papers could be emotionally and academically challenging, but the students persevered – something I again attribute to the paper’s personal relevance to each student.

I admit not all students connected with the assignment. Students who eschewed advice and wrote on highly sensitive topics struggled the most with this assignment, as they were dealing with intense and unresolved colonial trauma during a stressful and challenging assignment. Some students dealing with unrelated personal challenges that interrupted their course work also struggled with completing the work. The assignment is challenging, both personally and academically; students facing external barriers could not dedicate as much time as they might have liked or even needed to for a paper of this intensity.

Nonetheless, the rewards of the assignment and the course as a whole were significant. The unique individual power each of those papers held was apparent on its own. The greatest transformative power of this assignment, I would argue, was in its capacity to re-story individuals’ own lives, the impact that colonialism has had on them, and their own personal power to decolonize. In other words, it allowed them to change the lens through which they viewed their own lives, their capacity to decolonize, and their role in reconciliation. Students intuitively concluded their papers on a positive note, despite the difficult and traumatic experiences they might have discussed during their papers. Many of them spoke to optimistic futures, the strength they demonstrated in their perseverance through those difficult circumstances.

In seeing that writing process unfold, it became more apparent how this assignment enabled both self-determination and decolonization for the students as authors and as witnesses to each others’ stories. For Indigenous students, the assignment facilitated decolonization at the personal and individual level by allowing students to acknowledge the impact of colonialism in their lives, their families’ lives, and their cultures, the “truth” that must precede reconciliation. For non-Indigenous students, it allowed them to move past their colonial guilt and claim a more active role in decolonization and reconciliation. Moreover, as a collection, these autoethnographies also held a “collective” power that facilitated reconciliation in the classroom. By sharing their perspectives, experiences and research on colonialism and decolonization throughout the semester, they gained a deeper understanding of what reconciliation in practice truly means.

That experience was shared by the audience during the presentations, albeit in a slightly different way. The autoethnographies were presented in sequence, without

interruption between them, thus experienced collectively. They were not only individual stories or interpretations: they comprised part of a whole which has its own meaning and value, and in some ways, might be considered more than the sum of its parts. Collectively, the papers created a more nuanced understanding of colonialism and reconciliation as complex and varied. As Paul Whitinui (2014) explained,

Our lives and our cultures are composed of overlapping stories. Inherent in every story is the desire to find one’s authentic voice, but if we only hear a single story about another person or country, we risk a critical misunderstanding of being able to truly relate to another person’s story because we have no experience or connection to that person’s life. Finding truth in a single story therefore requires that we are careful of judging specific contexts or using approaches that are only indicative of equating measures that are then rationalized as a form of social and cultural criteria. Alternatively, we cannot assume that one person’s story is enough to crystalize, predict, or influence the necessary or sustainable change we often seek in telling our stories – culturally and/or politically. (p. 467)

Likewise, we cannot rely on a single story to help us understand the implications of colonialism, or to achieve decolonization.

From my own personal experience teaching, I can attest to the impact that autoethnographies had. Students learned about each other’s experiences with colonialism and decolonization, developed sympathy and understanding of each other’s positions, and came closer to bridging those gaps that colonialism has created: those between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Peoples, and those between personal experience and academic understanding. Moreover, the presentation of these autoethnographies to a wider audience had a demonstrable impact. Witnesses/audience members commented extensively and emphatically on the transformative power of these presentations for both presenters and audience. But it wasn’t only the personal impact of learning each others’ lived experiences, it was also the empirical learning that accompanied each of those experiences. To have only shared personal experiences would not have had the same effect.

## Conclusion

It is my own experience as a professor who seeks to achieve decolonization in my teaching that frames this discovery. I have learned that sharing personal stories, understandings, and experiences realize significant successes in teaching, learning, and living out decolonization – but only when contextualized by a

sound empirical framework. Creating space for students to integrate academic content into their own interpretations, experiences, and knowledge facilitates this result. Indigenization, decolonization, and reconciliation are happening, not necessarily through government-sponsored policies, changes in institutional structures, or other top-down approaches, but among individuals in the classroom where dialogue, stories, and life experiences have a place alongside academic, empirical knowledge. It was with this perspective that I came to see autoethnography as a means of formally engaging students in work that humanized and personalized processes of reconciliation, decolonization, and Indigenization.

If, as I suggested at the start, autoethnography might be a way to actively engage in decolonization in that personal narratives have the power to appeal to broader audiences, and a researched context has the capacity to convince, then we can conceive of ways in which autoethnography might take a place in the larger project of Indigenization and reconciliation which have now become the mandate of most universities in Canada. It may also allow for those processes to take place in meaningful, genuine ways, thus turning away from what has increasingly been criticized as empty tokenism. In the final tally, if we are to realize decolonization in any meaningful way, we must, as individuals, be able to see it as something doable. Autoethnography, then, is not merely about telling personal stories; rather, it is about realizing individual and personal power to enact decolonization and reconciliation.

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