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## Evidence of Co-learning through a Relational Pedagogy: Indigenizing the Curriculum through MIKM 2701

Emily Root

*Cape Breton University*, emilyroute@hotmail.com

Stephen Augustine

*Cape Breton University & Unama'ki College*, stephen\_augustine@cbu.ca

Kathy Snow

*Cape Breton University*, kathy\_snow@cbu.ca

Mary Doucette

*Cape Breton University*, marybeth\_doucette@cbu.ca

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# Evidence of Co-learning through a Relational Pedagogy: Indigenizing the Curriculum through MIKM 2701

## **Abstract**

In the winter term of 2016, Cape Breton University launched a revised version of a second year Mi'kmaw Studies course entitled Learning from the Knowledge Keepers of Mi'kmaki (MIKM 2701). This course was designed to be led by local Elders and Knowledge Keepers with facilitation support from university faculty. It was designed by course facilitators as a dual-mode course, with the opportunity for students to participate face-to-face and online, and the excitement it generated quickly went "viral." In this paper, we describe the experiences of the participants in the course through an analysis of their own reflections on the 13 weeks of instruction. The aim of this analysis is to share course design considerations for post-secondary institutions attempting to "Indigenize the academy" at a course level, but also to evaluate the process of co-learning as it was evidenced in the course as a means to address educational complexity and decolonization efforts in the classroom.

Au cours du trimestre d'hiver de 2016, l'Université du Cap-Breton a lancé une version révisée d'un cours de deuxième année d'études mi'kmaw intitulé « Learning from the Knowledge Keepers of Mi'kmaki » (Apprendre avec les gardiens du savoir du Mi'kmaki) (MIKM 2701). Ce cours avait été conçu de façon à être dirigé par des aînés et des gardiens du savoir originaires de la région avec le soutien de professeurs de l'université. Il avait été conçu par les facilitateurs du cours en tant que cours bi-mode, qui donnait l'occasion aux étudiants de participer face à face et en ligne, et l'enthousiasme qu'il a généré s'est rapidement propagé. Dans cet article, nous décrivons les expériences des participants inscrits dans le cours par le biais d'une analyse de leurs propres réflexions sur les 13 semaines d'enseignement. L'objectif de cette analyse est de partager les considérations concernant la conception du cours à l'intention des établissements d'enseignement post-secondaire qui voudraient « indigéniser l'université » au niveau d'un cours, mais également d'évaluer le processus de co-apprentissage tel qu'il a été mis en évidence dans ce cours en tant que moyen de répondre à la complexité éducationnelle et aux efforts de décolonisation dans la salle de classe.

## **Keywords**

culturally relevant pedagogy, co-learning, Indigenous pedagogy, blended learning, community engaged learning, participatory reflective case study, Indigenous studies, Indigenous education, decolonizing education, settler-colonial studies, intercultural relations and reconciliation

## Setting the Stage for Co-learning

The research we embarked upon aimed to explore the learning journey for diverse participants in the historically complex environment that is Canadian education. Our shared journey started at Cape Breton University (CBU) in the winter of 2016, with an open access, twelve-week course entitled *Learning from Knowledge Keepers of Mi'kma'ki* (calendar title: MIKM 2701). It was co-facilitated by Mi'kmaw Hereditary Chief and then Dean of Unama'ki College, Stephen Augustine, and former faculty member, Dr. Ashlee Cunsolo, who taught in collaboration with local L'nu<sup>1</sup> Elders and Knowledge Keepers. By the end of the course, over 5000 participants had engaged in the course in some way. The aim of the course was to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation (TRCC, 2015) calls for action towards culturally relevant education by introducing Mi'kmaw-centered teaching and learning process that was grounded in the locally specific contexts of Unama'ki (Cape Breton) and Mi'kma'ki (the traditional territory of the Mi'kmaq, which includes Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island, New Brunswick and parts of Quebec). The goal was not to just learn about the Mi'kmaw, as an ethnographic exercise, but to create a learning environment in which a deeper understanding of relationships is developed through conversations. The course was, to some extent, limited by the formal structures of western/colonial university course design, including fixed time in the schedule, course credit hours, assessment practices, and approved technology. However, the course pushed the boundaries of these limitations. The research project arising from the course aimed to probe into two phenomena: the multiple and varied ways in which Mi'kmaq leaders, knowledge holders, educators, and community members share their knowledge and culture with the world and the ways in which participants respond to the teachings. The research question was: How do participants respond to and experience L'nu teachings in a formal university course led by Elders? Through a qualitative analysis of more than 100 participant reflections, we critically explored themes related to co-learning pedagogy, relationality, Indigenous knowledge sharing, and reconciliation. Emerging from the research is a description of and an approach to course design that supports co-learning in an institutional context. Additionally, the experiences from the perspectives of the diverse participant population, including both geographic “insiders” (i.e., local/regional L'nu and Settler), “outsiders” (i.e., national/international L'nu and non-Indigenous peoples), and the researchers themselves offer insights into transformative personal change for learners brought about by the structure of the learning. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, from an institutional learning perspective, the findings identify locally relevant barriers and supports to “Education for Reconciliation.” Co-learning design is an area of significant interest to us as a way to transform the university experience towards inclusivity and restore voice and vision of L'nu community to equal standing. In an era of reconciliation in Canada, this research is timely and relevant to all post-secondary institutions and instructional staff because it examines the impacts,

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<sup>1</sup>Throughout the paper the terms Indigenous, Aboriginal, Mi'kmaq, and L'nu may appear to be used interchangeably. They are used intentionally to connote increasing levels of specificity regarding identity communities. Mi'kmaw and L'nu are used interchangeably to refer to the Indigenous people of the Mi'kmaw Territory. Aboriginal has been used because it is a constitutionally recognized term within the context of Canada. Indigenous is used as an encompassing term recognizing there are diverse groups of communities who identify as the hereditary people of the land that is now referred to as Canada, yet they may not be recognized as such due to the Canadian legal definitions of Aboriginal. Participants also self-identified and used terms specifically with different intentions and we have followed this construct, reflecting our own and the participants choices based on the explanation outlined here.

implications and complexities of teaching for reconciliation, or, in the oft-quoted language of post-secondary reform, of “indigenizing the academy.”

## **Context and Rationale**

This research, as was MIKM 2701 itself, is a direct response to growing calls from Indigenous scholars for Indigenous and decolonizing pedagogies and perspectives in education and educational research (Battiste, 2013; Tuhiwai-Smith, 2008). Additionally, the two federal commissions of inquiry – the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples (RCAP) in 1996 and the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) in 2015 – formally identified the lack of culturally relevant education available to Aboriginal peoples. Ninety-four Calls to Action arose from the 2015 TRC Report. Of these calls, eleven address educational reform directly. In particular, Calls to Action numbers 62-65 request institutional funding, research, and commitment to integrating Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy into mainstream education (Sinclair et al., 2015, p. 7). The 2015 TRC Report further identifies two interrelated issues: that the lack of culturally relevant curricula and learning design has contributed to negative social and economic outcomes for Indigenous people in Canada; and that there is a lack of awareness in the general population about Aboriginal cultures, knowledge systems and perspectives. According to Kuokkanen (2007) “the academy seems inhospitable, if not openly hostile, to many Indigenous People for three main reasons: lack of relevance, lack of respect and lack of knowledge about Indigenous issues” (p. 52). Our research hopes to confront these paucities in education and society.

The research may also contribute to the growing number of provincial and national education policy frameworks that call for a foregrounding of Indigenous Education (ACDE, 2009; Assembly of First Nations/AFN, 2013; Council of Ministers of Education Canada/CMEC, 2009); as well, it may add insight to the University’s own stated commitment to “Indigenization” – or rather, to “Embracing the L’nu.” Most significantly, this research honours the generosity and leadership of Mi’kmaq Knowledge Keepers who share their wisdom and extend invitations for intercultural co-learning and reconciliation in Unama’ki.

## **The Design of Knowledge Keepers Course**

On a practical level, MIKM 2701 Learning from Knowledge Keepers of Mi’kma’ki was developed as a result of a long-standing collaboration between College and University. Together, they have been successfully developing a program of Indigenous education for the past thirty years. The course description as shared on the University website stated that the course was an opportunity to:

learn about the rich cultures, ceremonies, history, knowledge, ways of knowing, and wisdom of Mi’kmaq peoples in Unama’ki and Mi’kma’ki. [...] learn about the meaning and context of Treaties and answer the calls from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Topics covered [...] include the Mi’kmaq Creation story, oral history and traditions, Indigenous governance, the ongoing legacies of residential schools, the Peace and Friendship Treaties, the impacts of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, and moving from challenges to strengths and resilience within Mi’kmaq communities. (CBU, 2015)

The course content comprised Mi'kmaq oral history and traditional knowledge as presented by the Knowledge Keepers of Mi'kma'ki. Students learned about the Mi'kmaq Creation Story, which elaborated on the spiritual and physical relationships between humans, birds, plants, and animals and fish. Students also learned how this story has contributed to Mi'kmaq cultural and linguistic identity. As well, students were taught about the traditional life of Indigenous peoples in the Eastern Maritimes on Mi'kmaq territory before the arrival of European peoples to North America. They also learned about Mi'kmaq perspectives on the "Arrival of Strangers" and the relationships that ensued thereafter. The classes fostered discussion on many topics including cultural conflicts, current and past and the meaning of the Treaties of Peace and Friendship entered into between European and Indigenous nations. The course also addressed the development of the Canadian Confederation, the Department of Indian Affairs, Indian reserves, the enormous impact of residential schools and the colonial experience. Each week, in what became known among the participants and instructors as Mi'kmaw Mondays, the course facilitators would welcome at least one Knowledge Keeper to the course. These individuals would share their knowledge and stories about the theme or issue being addressed that week.

The course was grounded in cultural tradition and began and ended with traditional ceremonial proactively led by Stephen Augustine. It was the delivery method as much as the content that was significant in creating a safe space for learning. The course was created, facilitated and delivered by Indigenous and non-Indigenous faculty together with administrators, audio-visual technicians, staff and numerous other individuals at University, in collaboration with local Elders and other Mi'kmaq knowledge keepers and youth.

The importance of this course was grounded in its objective to develop understanding about our collective historical experience as Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians, through co-learning and relationality. The definition of co-learning for the purposes of course design was the facilitation of a learning environment that encouraged all participants to learn together equally, to develop a shared understanding to better connect with one another (Bartlett, Marshall & Marshall, 2012). Learning design was premised on the belief that once Canadians learn together about our collective past, we will share more conciliatory attitudes with each other. What also stood out about this course were its spiritual and relational components, which seemed to reach both the face-to-face audience and those participating online. Applying the Connelly and Clandinin (1988) notion of personal practice, Orr, Paul, and Paul (2002) infuse the personal with the cultural. Orr et al. (2002) interpret Mi'kmaw teaching as a cultural practice, where understanding self in relation to others is a foundational aspect of Indigenous pedagogy. This class structure followed traditional openings and closing for gatherings in which a M'kmaw Elder leads the group in ceremonies of prayer, offering tobacco, smudging with sweetgrass and sage, and singing and drumming as appropriate for the occasion. This spirituality set the tone and ambiance for the evening of class, which ran 2.5 hours with no breaks. Due to the sensitivity of the subject matter discussed in the course, it was important for participants and facilitators both to show respect for and to honour the dignity and pride exuded by the Mi'kmaq Knowledge Keepers and to the listening audience.

### **The Format for Delivery**

Course knowledge in MIKM 2701 was shared through a series of lectures, presentations, and dialogues. The course was blended and multi-modal, meaning participants could engage face-to-face or online. Moreover, both online and face-to-face participants could communicate synchronously or asynchronously based around their own preferences. It was also offered free of

charge to anyone who wanted to participate as an “open” student. Open students were given the option of receiving acknowledgement of participation in the form of a certificate, which they could obtain by paying a nominal processing fee and submitting reflections on the weekly lessons. The course instructors anticipated that about 25 participants would register for credit, and they hoped to extend participation to 50-100 open students online. In fact, course participation in MIKM 2701 ranged from 40-60 face-to-face participants weekly, with much larger numbers of people participating online. Twenty-five students completed the course for credit, while 220 completed the open certificate option.

Because the course surpassed enrollment expectations exponentially, facilitators and the institution used an emergent course design in an effort to re-scale the course for the “viral”-like audience. By the final week of the course, there were over 5300 registered participants from more than 26 countries, and video streamed content supplied by Bell Media had been viewed at least 22,000 times. The course was made possible by the great support from departments, offices throughout the university, and the wider community – both Mi’kmaq and non-Mi’kmaq. Though at the outset the main goal of the course was to teach Mi’kmaw knowledge, history, culture, identity, and contemporary issues, as this paper will show, it also became an opportunity for relationship building that supported co-learning journeys that have outlived the active period of the course offering.

This was the University’s first large-scale open initiative and has been recognized by Tony Bates as a “pocket of innovation” with regard to successful adaption of MOOCs for higher education (Bates, 2017). However, it is the pedagogical design as a response to the 2015 TRC Report’s Calls for Action that distinguishes the course in terms of its impact on the university’s relationship to the community. From a pedagogical perspective, the course design loosened the boundaries between formal and informal learning by offering participants a variety of ways to participate. They could attend the face-to-face sessions on Monday evenings, watch live though streaming provided by Bell Media’s community access channel, or view the archived video. Participants could engage with the speakers and themes discussed each week in a number of ways, including directly asking questions in the face-to-face sessions; responding with images or messages through social media, using the hashtag #taliaq as an aggregator in Twitter; or by joining a closed and moderated Facebook group developed to support the course. Even if participants chose never to speak publicly, they were invited to submit journal responses to the facilitators as part of the completion of both the credit and certificate courses.

## Method

### Methodology

The research process was informed by Indigenous (Kovach, 2010; Steinhauer, 2002), decolonizing (Battiste, 2013; Tuhiwai-Smith, 1999, 2008), and *Indigen-ist* (Simpson, 2004; Wilson, 2007) paradigms, which are “ethical, performative, healing, transformative, decolonizing, and participatory” (Denzin, Lincoln, & Tuhiwai-Smith, 2008, p. 2). These paradigms are also “committed to dialogue, community, self-determination, and cultural autonomy [and] dedicated to the goals of justice and equity” (p. 2). In our participatory reflective case study, a modification of Maclellan’s (2008) reflective case study process, we applied these paradigms by focusing our examination on the experiences of students’ reflections.

## Participants and Data Collection

At the outset of the research, we obtained Research Ethics Board and Mi'kmaw Ethics Watch approval. We then invited all course participants to include their reflections in our research study. These reflections which were also used as a course assignment consisted of one page open ended personal responses on any themes which the student identified as important during a particular week. Final reflections were submitted for course credit/certificate, and for those that agreed to participate in the research, this final assignment (consisting of 12 one-page reflections) was shared with the researchers. Our invitation to participate in research, which was disseminated through the reflection submission portal (Moodle), explicitly stated that certificate of completion/course credit was not in any way dependent on the participants' decision to be included (or not) in the study. Participants did not receive any inducements for participation. Each of the 189 participants chose to submit their reflections for the purpose of this study.

Participants were not asked to self-identify; however, a profile of the participants emerged from our reading of the reflections. From the 189 research participants' course reflections, it was determined the face-to-face participants included a mix of Indigenous and non-Indigenous students and community members, several of whom were taking the course for credit in the context of their Bachelor of Nursing degree. The online student cohort was also diverse. Participants included L'nu youth and adults with a deep-rooted connection to their culture, as well as Indigenous participants from other regions of Canada. Other participants included L'nu who were not as knowledgeable about their culture and who sought to learn more, as well as non-Indigenous people. The non-Indigenous participants included new immigrants to Canada as well as individuals who did not live in Canada. They comprised people considered to be visible minorities in Canada and Caucasians. In short, the ethnicities of the course reflected the diversity and complexity created by a version of Canadian multiculturalism that is complicated by historical and present political agendas (Fleras & Elliott, 2003; Guo & Wong, 2015; Stein, 2007). There was no identifiable difference between the reflections submitted by face-to-face participants and those submitted by online participants. We hope that our analysis and presentation of this research demonstrates our desire to engage in the discussion of culture identity that is respectful of the diverse perspectives offered to us by the variety of participants and contributors.

## Data Analysis

For qualitative thematic analysis, we drew on constructivist grounded theory (CGT) (Charmaz, 2006), which Kovach (2011) describes as compatible with and helpful to Indigenous research. CGT is an approach to thematic analysis that acknowledges that sensitizing concepts also inform the research and “offer ways of seeing, organizing, and understanding experience” (Charmaz, 2006, p. 259).

The primary investigators (PIs) each engaged in a process of initial or “quick” coding to identify possible keywords and themes revealed in the data. Over several meetings, we looked for patterns, grouped and regrouped themes, and discussed what we collectively perceived to be emergent meta- and sub-themes. We acknowledge that with such a large volume of data, and as a group of four, it was challenging to settle on a discrete set of meta-themes with which to work; however, we did reach a consensus to work with five of the most salient meta-themes.

Over a period of two months, two research assistants – one L'nu and one non-Indigenous – were trained in thematic coding and the use of Atlas Ti. As they became aware of new sub-

themes, they consulted with the PIs and added these to the list of codes. Finally, raw coded data was amalgamated in reports by meta- and sub-themes for interpretation by the PIs. Below, we report on the most prominent findings.

## Results

### Emergent Themes of Co-Learning for Reconciliation Experiences

First, we acknowledge that capturing the full depth of the meta- and sub-themes we identified cannot be achieved within the limitations of this paper. Instead, we present an overview of all themes in an attempt to provide a holistic description of the participants' co-learning experience.

#### Identifying Cultural Self

The research participants' responses reflected the complexity and messiness of culture and cultural identities. Therefore, "identifying cultural self" was a meta-theme that emerged in the findings. While the study participants were not required to identify their culture, invariably most did so early in their reflections, thus contextualizing perceptions of their culture in relation to the discourse of the Mi'kmaw culture presented in the classes. They tended to identify their cultural selves based on four general sub-themes: (a) by gender, (b) as Mi'kmaw people reconnecting with culture, (c) as Mi'kmaw people with existing strong cultural pride and resilience, and (d) as people "other" than Mi'kmaw. From those positions, they expressed the meaningful process of (re)connecting as exemplified:

Being a part of this course was a vital experience for me, as a human being striving to understand myself and others, but also as a person of mixed heritage who has not grown up with much knowledge or family. I've spent two decades, many of my teenage and young adult years, trying to reconnect and learn whatever I could. To me this course fills in not only knowledge of my First Nations family and relations, but it also helps to fill in the gaps of my heart. Seeing and hearing Elders and community members speak has both warmed my heart, and ripped open old wounds, and I am grateful for both...For me, this has renewed my sense of pride. Being brought up in Ontario, I did not have access to our Culture and Heritage, resulting in feeling somewhat like an outsider. Knowing that there were so many people signing in from 26 different countries made me realize that I was not alone. –participant 105

The course encouraged both Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants to reflect on cultural heritage in order to make sense of what was being presented to them as Mi'kmaw culture. As one participant observed, "I personally now have a greater appreciation for the history of my ancestors both positive and negative. Now it is more real to me" (participant 86). Self-identified non-Indigenous participants explained how the Indigenous teachings helped them understand connections they had always felt but had found difficult to express. Non-Indigenous participants also expressed appreciation for community members who had accepted them (and often their ancestors) while helping them build new connections to culture and the land in various ways. As participant 149 stated: "This course played a fundamental role in helping me understand not only

my connection to the Mi'kmaq people but a spiritual link to my past.” The position and importance of women to Mi'kmaw society was an aspect of cultural difference that was mentioned frequently by participants. The knowledge of the disruption of the role of women in Mi'kmaw society resonated throughout the responses, particularly by female participants as exemplified by the following reflection from participant 32:

As I listened to the Traditional Knowledge Keepers I thought deeply about my roles and responsibilities: Wife, Mother, Grandmother, Great Grandmother. Our family circle includes Metis, Status and Non-Status Indians and non-Aboriginals. I can use my expanded knowledge about the impacts of colonization, history, forced resettlement, residential schools, the Indian Act and the judicial system to improve our family relationships.

Although the role of Mi'kmaw women as matriarch and life-giver, and the rediscovery by participants, raises critical feminist themes and could be discussed at length in subsequent papers, the intention of the illustration here is highlight the forms of self-reflection awakened in participants.

### ***Msit No'kmaq: Relating***

A key meta-theme was *msit no'kmaq*, or, “all my relations.” This is the Mi'kmaw concept of relating and being in relationship. According to Greenwood (2009), *msit no'kmaq* causes learners to reflect on who they are in context and how they got there in relation to all others. Notably, participants in the study referenced types of relationships and the impact of relational pedagogies. As sub-themes, three types of relationships emerged: intercultural relations, intergenerational relations and relationships with the land. In reflecting on land and personal relationships, participant 148 stated:

I appreciated the openness that both Stephen and Clifford had in welcoming non-Indigenous peoples and acknowledging their connection to the land despite being new comers. During the dialogue, Clifford was stressing the importance of traditional knowledge, and he included the importance of traditional knowledge of non-native people who live off the land. The land can form a connection with all people, and I strongly believe this connection is missing and its re-establishment and the incorporation of hands on learning approaches could help, if not solve, many of our modern day issues.

The participants' testimonies also evidenced co-learning through relational pedagogies; these emerged as the sub-themes of song, humour, ceremony, storytelling, personal interaction, listening, parenting, two-eyed seeing, and learning community. In describing the critical role of ceremony within the course, participant 109 stated:

Throughout the course, it was really valuable to be introduced to Mi'kmaq ceremony. In the course, we heard about their importance but also better understand by being witness to them, even if by video feed. The ceremonies reflect beautiful and essential wisdom: the seven sacred directions showing respect and gratitude to each direction, the importance of the drum as the heartbeat of the Mother.

Further, participant 103 outlined the importance of laughter in learning, especially when the space in which the learning takes place may be contentious and challenging: “I appreciate the way that humour can help to create an environment where one doesn’t necessarily even realize they are learning as they are having fun.” Participant 81 captured the importance of *msit no'kmaq* in learning by stating: “What I learned from this class is that oral history and stories live vibrantly in the hearts of those who shared and were a part of them. The way Stephen told these things was so intimate that I felt I knew them too.”

### **Feeling: Experiencing Emotion**

Participants described their experiences as emotional journeys that included a wide range of diverse and intense feelings. The emotions most frequently presented included gratitude, joy, sadness, inspiration, empathy, shame, guilt, and fear. In the classes that took place in the earlier part of the course, participants reflected on the joy they experienced in learning L’nu stories. They expressed feeling grateful to University and the Knowledge Keepers for creating a rare opportunity to listen to powerful messages. Individuals could experience a range of emotions in a single class as exemplified by non-Indigenous participant 78:

During class each week I experienced laughter as well as pain as I was sometimes saddened as I learnt the history of some of my close friend’s ancestors. I am so delighted to better understand the Mi’kmaki’s beliefs and values.

Similarly, participants acknowledged positive emotions at the conclusion of the course as L’nu participant 150 remarked: “I found so much joy in this class and after learning about the histories of my ancestors’ sufferings I was carrying a lot of sadness. Today I feel much better and a hopeful of a new beginning.”

Participants recognized it was important to learn about difficult topics such as the legacy effects of residential schools and the large numbers of Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls (MMIWG). Participants reflected on the stories told about residential school experience by survivor Clark Paul. In writing about Paul’s stories, they used words such as “heart wrenching,” “heartbroken,” “saddened,” and “painful.” Many self-identified Indigenous participants noted their sadness either at being disconnected from their language and family or in recalling the painful memories that caused the disconnection. Simultaneously, non-Indigenous participants identified responsibility in expressing their feelings of shame and guilt. However, most participants ended their journey feeling hopeful and inspired to work towards change, as exemplified by participant 44:

This course was very emotional for me as I learned about the injustices the Indigenous had to endure, the hurt they felt as it spilled into generations after them. It also gave me hope that there are powerful leaders to stand up and create change in order for Indigenous to finally get the recognition they deserve, so they can heal and move forward in a more positive and successful way.

## **Shifting Away from Eurocentrism**

The majority of participants either directly reported or were observed through changing observations noted within reflections to shift in worldview away from the dominant norm of Eurocentrism. The shift manifested itself in three major ways: a development of new beliefs and a concomitant new respect for other cultures; feelings of uncertainty or confusion, and/or an unsettling of one's views on culture; and a change in action or behaviours associated with a shift in worldview. At the initial stages of the course, participants simply illustrated new awareness or new knowledge of history/culture, which they tried to place in the context of what they now understood as the need for cultural change and recognition between Mi'kmaw and Eurocentric values. Such a new consciousness was expressed by participant 28 as follows:

This course changed my understanding of residential schools. I had not taken the time to consider the multi-generational impact of cultural genocide. A great way to start to remediate the damage is through the curriculum including the Mi'kmaq language, songs, dancing, and traditional activities such as canoeing.

As internal de-centring progressed within participants, they illustrated how they were confused about – and now questioned – history of Canada since colonization.:

The Mi'kmaq lives were not improved or saved by having the Europeans show up. They were doing quite fine for thousands of years without anyone coming to their rescue. I have often pondered the question of what this area would be like today if the French and British had not arrived and laid claim to it, and disrupted the lives of the people who were already here. –participant 75

And finally, many participants sought to change both their own actions and the actions of others in relation to their new understandings:

I want to be part of the change I hope for and this course is one step in that. I see change happening in small ways all around. My five-year-old (Grade Primary) is being taught about Mi'kmaq culture and to speak Mi'kmaq words and songs by her French immersion teacher. Lucky kid. Being part of change takes effort and understanding –I saw this week that learning more Mi'kmaq knowledge is a part of this, both individually and collectively. And, that the teaching themselves can help us be more reflective and understanding. – participant 143

## **Sticking to Cultural Grounding**

Korteweg et al (2014) describe being “stuck” as one of several stages in decolonizing change. They write, that being stuck or sticking is part of the process of resisting and familiarizing towards change. Drawing on their concept, we noticed a similar phenomenon in our study; some Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants remained in a state of sticking – that is, we observed that some participants maintained worldviews that were at odds with what they were learning. This created tensions for them as they tried to make sense of the dialogue the course inspired. Sometimes, participants exhibited in their reflective statements ways in which they themselves

stuck to engrained worldviews. At other times, they wrote about other people, such as family members not in the course, sticking to entrenched perspectives. Sticking manifested as ignorance, mis-education, misrepresentation, racism, reifying dominant histories and “perfect stranger” positioning (Dion, 2009). Conversely, it also materialized positively as empowerment, or affirmation of culture. For example, some L’nu participants found the course gave them the opportunity to learn more; it raised awareness and pride through learning or relearning about the resilience and strength exemplified in traditional L’nu way of life. As participant 145 noted:

Our legends and stories are a way to keep our history going. Our ancestors did not write down the history and now the recorded counts are often bias as seen through a non-native perspective who considered the first people to be savage and ignorant. The Mi’kmaq people were not savage ignorant heathens, we were and still are spiritual beings, healers, story tellers, imaginative artists and poets. –participant 145

For other L’nu participants, the course precipitated a “me too” response:

My point is: some of what happened in residential schools reflected the “European” societal norms of the times. Our people were wounded too; our succeeding generations also suffer. –participant 22

Non-Indigenous participants, by contrast, were more likely to comment on the tightly held Eurocentric beliefs of others, rather than on themselves. They articulated a desire that these “others” would “un-stick”:

People can get very uncomfortable talking about the crimes and wrongs committed in the past (and totally ignore the injustices of the present) against the Mi’kmaq. They say Why bring it up? It wasn't my generation. I shouldn't have to feel guilty for something I didn't do. People need to stop feeling so self-conscience and actually listen to and get the reason why it is so important to talk about the past and the present and the future. –participant 46

The participants also demonstrated how they had experienced misinformation in the past – something they only recognized during the course as having been incorrect. We observed this in phrases they used in their reflections, including “I didn’t realize...” or “when I was in school I learned...” Additionally, instances of participants sharing misinformation through social media and the kind community self-correction which occurred are discussed in detail in Snow, Root, Augustine and Doucette (in review).

## Discussion

We want to highlight that our interpretation of co-learning experiences is a result of both the analysis of the participants’ responses and the positions of the researchers, each of whom are on their own journey of reconciliation learning. As researchers, we occasionally faced our own conflicts of analysis. The resulting discussions from these tensions, as well as the time taken to reach this point of analysis (more than two years after the completion of the course), are a reflection of our own co-learning and our coming to terms with what we derived from the course.

The five themes discussed in the previous section, which emerged from the participants' experience, were: (a) identifying cultural self (situating), (b) *msit no'kmaq* or relating to others and the natural environment, (c) feeling or experiencing and acknowledging the emotions raised through learning, and (d) responding through shifting and/or (e) sticking in personal position. The five themes provide a framework for co-learning design, that is fundamentally interconnected. As Lavallee (2009) cautions, it is challenging to examine the themes as parts, while remaining focused on the nature of transformative decolonization. However, if we re-examine the participants' responses from the perspective of individual transformation, rather than as the aggregation of collective experience, a cyclical pattern of learning emerges that describes the participants' own learning journey. Participants' reflections in the initial weeks of the course were focused primarily on the self; in these responses, they examined their own position and related it to others' positions. This resulted in the stirring up of emotions that, for some, were very challenging. All participants expressed some form of grief upon learning the truth of the L'nu experience with colonialism. We saw these emotions as they were shared in the reflections, as well in the recorded face-to-face sessions. These emotions were supported through the learning community with humour, ceremony, respect, and thoughtful responses from the facilitators. The course exhibited a balance between negative and positive emotions with laughter and ceremony used to bring about catharsis.

The experiences of a range of emotions fundamentally changed many students' worldviews; for the L'nu and other Indigenous students, these changes were expressed as empowerment, based on the way in which facilitators acknowledged Indigenous worldviews and publicly "outed" the truth. Non-Indigenous participants, once they had emerged from feelings of shame and guilt, identified the need to know and do more. They also articulated a desire to shift away from the Eurocentric history and vision of Canada to something that was different, but most could not articulate what the new action or approach should be.

If we examine this pattern in the context of what can be described as mainstream approaches to transformative education, we see familiar elements of critical pedagogy and adult learning; however, aspects of "embracing the L'nu" go beyond this literature. Critical or anti-colonial pedagogy described in the Freirian model of "education as an instrument of liberation" (Freire, 2002, p. 7) explains a process of learning that disrupts social injustice and oppressive power structures by creating a discourse that informs and empowers students and teachers to create social change in their communities (Battiste, 2000; Freire, 2002; Semali & Kincheloe, 1999). In the context of the current study, this learning was observed in participants naming injustice and seeking to change the behaviour of self or others. According to Wheeler (as cited in Wilson, 2004), decolonization is founded in auto-criticism, self-reflection, and the rejection of victimization positions. Wheeler further characterized decolonizing education as education seated in empowerment and affirmation of Indigenous cultural values to transform negative reactionary energy into positive rebuilding energy (Wheeler as cited in Wilson, 2004). Again, we observed this in student reflections that continue to be displayed on the course-based Facebook page that is still active today, more than two years after the completion of the course. Regarding what can be learned from this study, there are four key lessons or challenges to "embracing the L'nu" from a curriculum and pedagogical standpoint.

## **1. Include Ceremony and Spiritualism in Core Teaching**

Ceremony was a critical aspect of the course; as articulated by X, it set the tone for learning. The students acknowledged that ceremony facilitated the creation of a safe and community-

oriented space. Public school teachers and administrators who work in education systems dominated by Western values structures tend to shy away from using ceremony in public education for fear of its connection to religion (Battiste, 2013). However, the ceremony that opened and closed the classes in the current study were spiritual rather than religious, and it set the direction of the course; without this ceremony, it is questionable whether the course would have achieved what it did. The ceremony grounded the participants in place and mental space and determined the nature of the communication that followed. It also re-set participants' emotions at each evening's conclusion of the course. Benham (2008) states that this critical grounding in physical space, metaphysical place, and spiritual place is a vital part of the process that allows students to reawaken and become conscious of how ontologies are shaped and reshaped by culture and landscape. Ceremony should always be guided by local protocols and facilitated by those who are deemed by community to be the holders of those traditions.

## **2. Address Ugly Truths and Emotionally Triggering Events**

Garcia and Shirley (2012) claim the first step in decolonizing education is rediscovering history from an Indigenous perspective and developing a consciousness about Indigenous peoples' history with colonization and assimilation. Within this course the counter story of Mi'kmaq history opened the door or learning and growth and for seeing time, past present future, with a much clearer or new lens, allowing for multi-dimensional concept of perspectives and empathy. Students cried in this course. They were confronted with personal stories –grounded in direct experience – of colonial resistance and trauma. These were not sanitized stories for sensitive ears, and the course would not have been as transformative had they been. Wilson (2007) elaborates: The counter story is simply not an alternative version, but a story told from the point of view of the colonized; it deals with the resistance to knowledge as much as the lack of knowledge. Additionally, the presentation of counter stories through personal narratives, of those who are most impacted is critical in recognizing we are human and that we make mistakes (Restoule, 2017).

## **3. Focus on Specific Local Culture, Not Generalized Indigenous Education**

The success of the course offers evidence that education that is grounded in local contexts can facilitate identity development and the recognition of how the self fits into its cultural surroundings at national and international levels. Place-based education supports decolonization because it brings awareness and promotes dialogue through a deeply reflective process grounded in *msit no'kmaq* – or, all my relations. Regarding the current study, a critical aspect of the course was its specificity. It was not an “Indigenous” education course; instead, it was the story of the L'nu – people of the place where the story was told. This specificity allowed participants to make deeper connections to a tangible history rather than generalized understandings of the Indigenous experience. It honoured the people of place by acknowledging the diversity of Indigenous cultures, and it allowed participants to build real relations with real people. For example, participants met and heard from Clark Paul, who described his personal experience with residential school using landmarks and locations with which most – if not all – of the local participants would be familiar. It is far more difficult to resist truths when they are tied to everyday places and people. Mignolo (2009) describes this approach as important to an epistemic shift for participants by encouraging them to conceptualize the past from different perspectives – without universalizing – to foster an acceptance of multiple historical narratives concurrently.

#### 4. Encourage Critical Reflection through Assessment that Values Qualitative Responses

Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples have internalized colonized ideas and practices in relation to education (Wheeler as cited in Wilson, 2004). Therefore, part of the decolonizing process for learners is the development of a critical self-awareness (Wane, 2009). The majority of those who participated in this research had a personal interest in the subject. It was not a required course; they wanted to engage in the course in order to reconcile/resolve their internal emotional life history struggles. The reflection used for assessment purposes gave a voice and legitimacy to participants. It allowed them to reflect on what, for some, represented a life-long struggle to position their personal identity in the old Canadian discourse.

The MIKM 2701 course indicates a shift in the Canadian discourse and possible healing. It helped participants replace years of unspoken family fear and shame with a new sense of personal and cultural pride and a relief. As post-secondary institutions aim to balance academic rigour against large-scale class enrollments, the tendency of assessment is to mark what is easiest both to assess and to defend as assessment. For example, at one end of the assessment spectrum we see tests of knowledge like multiple choice and true false responses, which leave no room for personal connection; while on the other end, we commonly see essay or paper writing assessments where personal synthesis can be developed by the students, but at a cost to time to mark for faculty. However, even with essay writing, the dominant paradigm of assessment is towards objective recounting or analysis from the colonial perspective, which can be considered another form of colonization (Cote-Meek, 2014). This practice moves students away from the relational and towards evidence-based practices. However, the ultimate stage of decolonization occurs in personal transformation, which is necessarily relational (Garcia & Shirley, 2012). The ideas of hope, empowerment, and transformation are embedded in the personal agency of individuals (Wesley-Esquimaux & Smoloewski, 2004). As observed in our research, individuals want to respond to the TRC Calls to Action. Some individuals want to respond because recent new information has triggered a sudden and unsettling revelation about their perceptions of their own Canadian culture and history. Participants reflect the new questions about the influence of incomplete histories presented by popular Canadian discourse. There were a few isolated participant responses in which participant reflection avoided self and focused on an objective re-telling or summary of each week's content. Those reflections were also most frequently associated with examples of Eurocentric sticking. We would propose that for deep co-learning to occur, the nature of assessment – which is most often what illustrates what is valued in course content – must be seated in personal reflection and personal growth. These elements of learning are challenging to associate with a number or letter grade.

The researchers were left with questions that exceed the scope of this paper about systemic and large-scale approaches to the adoption of Indigenous pedagogy at the University. Some of these questions have been examined by other researchers but demand further inquiry in our context. Examples include the impact of technology choice on Indigenous learning (McAuley & Walton, 2011; Snow, 2016) and the legacy of archived digital recordings of Elders participating in the course (and how these can be stored and used in respectful ways) (Wemigwans, 2018). Our work also alludes to further questions about, for example, the respectful integration of Indigenous ceremony and protocols, the respectful mitigation of mis-education in large scale communities, and the identified need of participants to act on new-found knowledge. Perhaps the Facebook group's longevity is a reflection of this desire to stay connected and continue learning and acting.

Many of the Calls to Action were directed at organizations and Canadian institutions who have the power to make systemic change. These questions are also beyond the scope of this study, but there is potential to investigate the way in which people respond on behalf of organizations and groups. The response within CBU to the Calls for Action demonstrated an institutional commitment to the goal of indigenization/Embracing the L'nu. The effort resulted in flattening some of the artificial divides between institutional departments within the academy by creating a space for collaboration between students, faculty, staff, and the broader community who also supported the goal. The choice to offer the course for free was strategic and ethical, but it was not sustainable because of the demand on resources and faculty. As such, it may not be replicable on the same scale. However, it informed the development of a new model for open education at CBU (Snow & Brann-Barrett, 2018). We still have more to learn. As stated at the outset, this is a journey of change and a larger discourse between multiple institutions reflecting on the success of their individual responses to the TRC calls is needed.

### **Conclusion**

As evidenced by enrollment numbers and reflections from MIKM 2701, the course provided something that people in Canada and around the world were seeking. Was it content knowledge, connection, or simply a desire not to miss the viral experience? We cannot be sure. Based on the kind of responses and on the number of people who visited the website, we firmly believe that this class was a success. We collected thousands of testimonials from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people who took the course that support the value of traditional learning by listening to the personal stories of the Mi'kmaq Knowledge Keepers.

Many of the people who registered for the course indicated that this kind of education – that is, information coming directly from the Mi'kmaq Knowledge Keepers – has never been available at no financial cost and online in such an organized fashion, or indeed in any format at all. Both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students expressed satisfaction about the kind of information shared during the course. Many non-Indigenous people simply stated that they had never been exposed to Indigenous storytelling, spiritual ceremonies, and actual accounts of residential school experiences from personal, Indigenous perspectives. Indigenous people indicated that they had never learned about their culture, language, and history in their school experiences. They added that it was wonderful to hear their own people using storytelling to convey their personal experiences.

In Canada, there is a need to know and understand who we are as Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians and to understand the underpinnings of what brought us here, today, in our society. Canadians have experienced a shared history from varying perspectives. They have diverse levels of awareness about the influence of colonial governments which have been heavily influenced by their cultural identification, perspectives and experiences. Now, collectively, we are being called upon to listen to one another and learn about the silenced past. Knowledge provides people with freedom – with the liberty to decide what our future can look like. Education for reconciliation is an opportunity our society has not previously been given. For more than 100 years our history has been predominantly told and written by the colonizers. Thus, it is a one-sided misrepresentation of the truth. According to the findings of the RCAP 1996 and the TRC 2015, the need to tell the whole truth about our reality today is important in order to reach a sense of reconciliation for Canada. We need such truth-telling so that further events of violence and deceit will not continue to occur.

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