

Winter 12-31-2019

## Exploring Reconciliatory Pedagogy and Its Possibilities through Educator-led Praxis

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<https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2019.3.9479>

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### Recommended Citation

Poitras Pratt, Y., & Danyluk, P. J. (2019). Exploring reconciliatory pedagogy and its possibilities through educator-led praxis. *The Canadian Journal for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning*, 10(3). <https://doi.org/10.5206/cjsotl-rcacea.2019.3.9479>

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# Exploring Reconciliatory Pedagogy and Its Possibilities through Educator-led Praxis

## **Abstract**

In the spirit of taking an action-based response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (2015) Calls to Action and principles, a group of educators came together in 2016 to create a one-year graduate pathway program that sets students on paths toward reconciliation. By examining the contributions of international and national scholars who explore topics of reconciliation, we extend this global discussion with insights gained from our praxis-based approach in education. Inspired by Chung (2016), we present a model which identifies a set of entry points into the work of reconciliation: listening and learning from Indigenous peoples; walking with and learning from Indigenous peoples; and, working with and learning from Indigenous peoples. By examining what we have learned through our program "Indigenous education: A call to action," our model posits that reconciliation is accessible to those who are willing to listen and learn, and, most importantly, take action.

Dans l'esprit de donner une réponse concrète aux appels à l'action et aux principes de la Commission de vérité et réconciliation (2015), un groupe d'éducateurs s'est réuni en 2016 pour créer un programme d'un an pour les diplômés qui met les étudiants sur la voie de la réconciliation. En examinant les contributions de spécialistes internationaux et nationaux qui explorent des thèmes de la réconciliation, nous élargissons cette discussion globale avec des informations tirées de notre approche de l'éducation fondée sur la praxis. Inspiré de Chung (2016), nous présentons un modèle qui identifie un ensemble de points d'entrée dans le travail de réconciliation: écoute et apprentissage des peuples autochtones; marcher avec les peuples autochtones et apprendre d'eux; et travailler avec et apprendre des peuples autochtones. En examinant ce que nous avons appris dans le cadre de notre programme « Éducation autochtone: un appel à l'action », notre modèle postule que la réconciliation est accessible à ceux qui sont disposés à écouter et à apprendre et, surtout, à passer à l'action.

## **Keywords**

reconciliatory pedagogy, Indigenous education, social justice, reconciliation, praxis; pédagogie de réconciliation, Éducation autochtone, justice sociale, réconciliation, praxis

## **Cover Page Footnote**

This project was funded through a Teaching Scholars' (2016-19) grant from the Vice-Provost Office, Taylor Institute of Teaching & Learning at the University of Calgary.

## Sharing our Stories: First Steps Towards Reconciliation

*Patricia:* I grew up in northern Manitoba surrounded by reserves and Métis communities. I attended school with and lived among Indigenous peoples, believing this was the experience of many Canadians. When I left to attend university in a larger urban centre, I began to understand how my experiences were different from those of my fellow students. I remember one professor telling the students in my class how wild my hometown was on a Saturday night. This, I believe, was an affirmation of his stereotypes around Indigenous peoples. After university, I returned to the north and worked for several years in some of the most remote reserves and Métis communities in Canada. Through our work as researchers (Postras Pratt & Danyluk, 2017), I have gained a deeper understanding of the complexities of Canadian identity and how positioning impacts individual perceptions of responsibility. As educators, we have found many new Canadians are either unaware of the experiences of Indigenous peoples in Canada or hold negative stereotypes; those who have been here for many generations are often fearful of engaging with Indigenous peoples, thinking they might not be welcomed, or that they may unintentionally misstep causing further harm.

*Yvonne:* As a Métis person raised away from my settlement community, I grew up with a confusing array of mixed messages; one moment I was told by my parents to hide my identity, and the next, I would be told to stand up for my rights as an Aboriginal (then Native) person. Amongst this confusion simmered the stark realities of a family trying to survive the dire consequences of a colonial legacy of shame and low self-esteem. In this place, dark secrets were kept and the growing up came hard. Looking back, I realized my early schooling was a place of refuge, and my close friends were sources of much-needed solace. Spending time with other families, those who did not suffer from colonial consequences, showed me there was another way to be in the world. In these homes, there was unconditional love and acceptance. It took several university degrees, years of counselling, and my own decolonizing to understand that the troubles of my home life stemmed from a history of colonialism more so than any individual deficits. This life lesson is the source of my hope and inspiration as I move forward in understanding how we might enact reconciliation through the power of education.

## Literature Review

As the work of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC, 2015a) and scholars such as Chung (2016) remind us, we Canadians are “poised at an important juncture” (p. 400). As educators representing both sides of this national issue, it is our shared belief that Canadians not only want reconciliation, but they also need it. Deep within us is an acknowledgement of the many injustices that a colonial takeover predicated on the First Peoples of Canada; yet this knowing also sits with guilt, anger, shame, and fear of not knowing what to do next. In asking what steps we need to take, Canadians demonstrate they want to be involved in the work of reconciliation yet many also fear making mistakes or missteps that could ultimately add to the hurt, and from an Indigenous perspective, this journey of reconciliation is one that risks further disappointment. Together, our agency as educators in working to create a graduate program that responds to the TRC Calls to Action (2015c) represents a very intentional choice to privilege praxis over theoretical musings.

The concept of reconciliation is itself a contested, and even divisive, notion (Chung, 2016; Garneau, 2016; Hamber & Kelly, 2009; Paulson, 2011; Reconciliation Canada, 2017). For some Indigenous peoples and scholars, the act of offering words of apology is simply not enough (Alfred, 2010), while others assert they have nothing to reconcile. As Garneau (2016) argues, the term itself is replete with a sense of restoring idealized relations mired in religious connotations. From a non-Indigenous perspective, the work of reconciliation revisits a troubled past that many Canadians would prefer to ignore. Because of this discomfort, Canadians may opt for inaction. Likewise, in *Unsettling the Settler Within*, Paulette Regan (2010) whose groundbreaking work in reconciliation has gained a wide audience, notes this type of paralysis enables settlers to remain at a safe distance and ultimately requires “no substantive change on our [settler] part” (p. 46). In the stories of truth and reconciliation that Metcalfe-Chenail (2016) offers her readers, she points out that many Canadians want to become involved in reconciliation but they find themselves “paralyzed...[and] terrified of doing it wrong” (pp. 2-3). Yet in the act of turning away, status quo is left intact, and this inaction ensures the injustices of the past continue to be replicated in a modern-day context. As teacher educators, we see the choice to do nothing as morally lacking and contrary to our teaching philosophies that seek positive change for the betterment of future generations. We also recognize that our influence is restricted to educational settings.

Inspired by the vision of Chief Robert Joseph, a Gwawaenuk Elder, a group of researchers from Reconciliation Canada – A New Forward Society (2017) surveyed both Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians on their attitudes towards reconciliation. Those surveyed acknowledged the hard realities of discrimination and racism alongside the ways in which a lack of communication contributes to a mutual sense of mistrust. In exploring what actions Canadians can embark on, the authors conclude that there is an “incredible window of opportunity to create lasting change” (p. 6). They also found that while both populations agree on the need for reconciliation, Indigenous peoples are notably more invested in this goal. This is not altogether surprising; certainly, non-Indigenous Canadians are granted the ability to walk away from the work of reconciliation—without repercussion.

But what are the consequences of such inaction? Philosophers who have studied reconciliatory efforts in the realm of global peace-making have observed that the integrity of a nation-state is contingent on their ability to recognize past injustices. In Rothermel’s (2011) words, “The most severe travesties of a nation’s past linger as the immutable measure of its need to recuperate its moral standing” (p. ix). In this statement, we see the power of truth-telling as a necessary element *en route* to reconciliation. In *Education and Reconciliation*, author and editor Paulson (2011) explores global responses to working towards reconciliation through education and concludes that “opportunities for contact between conflicting and previously conflicting groups” (p. 4) is one of the more common approaches in reconciliation through education; yet, she notes this approach is not always successful. One of the more passionate and outspoken Indigenous scholars, Cindy Blackstock (2011), delivered a poignant message to Canadians on the importance of action – doing - in her advocacy work for Aboriginal children:

More importantly, doing the right thing for First Nations children is an important moral test of the conscience of the [Canadian] Nation. Canada has the opportunity to do the right thing for First Nations children by providing equitable services in ways that respect and honour their cultures and languages. Please do – a generation of children and thousands of Canadians are depending on you to do what past Parliamentarians have failed to do. (p. 11)

Thinking about ways in which we might morally respond to these injustices, both past and present, should be the stance of well-meaning Canadians who wish to right the wrongs of the past. Understanding that everyone has a role in the work of reconciliation means we must work together to find solutions if we intend to come together as a unified nation. With our sights set on this brighter future, we share lessons learned from those who have taken up the work of reconciliation with a specific focus on the role of education in this critical work.

## **Global Lessons of Reconciliation**

Around the world, the work of reconciliation through education has been taken up in a variety of ways. While largely reflective of the diversity of global peoples and their unique colonial encounters, we believe important lessons for Canada can be garnered from scholars studying effective ways to enact reconciliation through education. Writing from an Australian context, scholars MacGill and Wyeld (2009) maintain: “Reconciliation is concerned with social justice and constructions of cultural identity” (p. 555). These authors assert that reconciliation not only includes issues of land dispossession but also extends to the ongoing loss of cultural identity amongst the colonized. To this end, mainstream media has played a significant role in influencing young learners by presenting a biased version of history that erases the presence of the original occupants and largely ignores the violent history of the colonizers. This “whitewashed” form of media is currently being challenged by new forms of media emanating from Indigenous perspectives (MacGill & Wyeld, 2009). Lately, Wyeld (2016) has used 3-D gaming as a way to foster empathy and raise important questions from students around Indigenous issues. We adopt a similar approach as we encourage our learners to imagine how the power of the arts, and especially media, can influence how people view the First Peoples of Canada.

As an early childhood educator working in Melbourne, Australia, Catherine Hamm (2015) has taken up Aboriginal understandings of land and space through storytelling as a way of enacting her own form of reconciliation pedagogy. She terms this land-based experiential learning process where Aboriginal knowledges are central to the learning as place-thought-walk (p. 56). By encouraging her students to expose the layers of colonialism which cloak traditional lands and age-old stories, Hamm (2015) intentionally makes space for the valuing of Aboriginal knowledges as central to learning about place. By taking her students to the land and using story as a vehicle for creating greater understanding, she is enacting a compelling form of reconciliation pedagogy. Similarly, our students spend a day out on a nearby First Nations reserve where they encounter stories told from the unique perspectives of the Siksika peoples and where they walk down the hallways of a former residential school now turned into a college for cultural revitalization. Students have continually remarked that this day out on the land represents a turning point in their learning.

Writing from a South African perspective, Ferreira and Janks (2007) assert reconciliation as being both over, yet never having begun (p. 72). These scholars focused their study on high school students interacting with family and other community members who lived through South Africa’s efforts at reconciliation in the 1990s. By bringing the era of attempted reconciliation to the present through an assignment that asked for family stories on this topic, this teaching assignment translated the idea of reconciliation from an abstract concept to meaningful and relevant learning. This assignment also established a telling connection from the learner’s family to the original peoples of South Africa. Another South African scholar, Nussey (2014), also used the term reconciliatory pedagogy to describe how he used dance with education students as a

medium for conveying the complex steps involved in reconciliation. Once again, the active involvement of learners in representing the complexities of reconciliation through movement is where a shift in understanding is possible. What these global attempts in reconciliation demonstrate is that learners need to be engaged in experiential and creative learning activities where abstract ideas of reconciliation are made concrete and personal. Similarly, in our summer courses, we ask students to translate an academic article into a creative presentation together with their peers. We also ask students to situate themselves, their families, and communities in relation to the work of reconciliation using Graveline's (1998) Self-in-relation model. In adopting risk-taking as a pedagogical strategy, we are encouraging our students to break free of conventional norms and to imagine another way of being, knowing and doing.

In taking our cue from these global lessons, we recognize the danger of reconciliation remaining in the realm of the abstract—where it may be viewed as being over, yet never having begun. We are also swayed by those educators who are taking creative risks in their pedagogical approaches; adopting land-based, storytelling, media-based, learner-personalized, and aesthetic approaches. The following section highlights some of the important lessons advanced by those involved in the work of reconciliation across our nation followed by our own decision to make a difference through education. In our work, we stress the significance of experiential learning alongside Indigenous peoples, as partners and as instigators, and the need for learning through listening.

### **Canadian Forms of Reconciliation**

From an educational perspective, the focus of most reconciliatory efforts has thus far been on curricular reform through provincial initiatives (Alberta Education, 2018; British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2016; Manitoba Education & Training, 2017). As a frontrunner in recent times, the *Canadian Deans' Accord on Indigenous Education* (Archibald, Lundy, Reynolds, & Williams, 2010) called for teacher education programs to mandate the inclusion of Indigenous education. In an effort to establish a baseline measure of how schools across Canada have been working towards reconciliation through education, KAIROS, an ecumenical group, issued a "Report Card: Provincial & Territorial Curriculum on Indigenous Peoples" in early 2017. This report revealed much of the curricular changes have taken place as a response to the TRC's Call to Action 62.1 where provinces and territories are asked to revise their curriculum to include, and honour, Indigenous perspectives, and to make this learning mandatory. Notably, some provinces are currently in dispute over the ways in which, or if, curricular reform should take place (Crawley, 2018; Fraser, 2017). This back-and-forth movement in the political realm reveals the precarious nature of reconciliation through education. One election can seemingly push back years of gaining vital ground thus we believe it is incumbent on educators to find ways forward – regardless of which party is in power.

Changing the curriculum to include First Peoples' perspectives is a critical step and will have significant impact on the next generation of Canadians; however, without teachers who possess a deep understanding of Canada's colonial history and ways in which to decolonize their own classrooms, the new curriculum will not be enough to right historical injustices. Moving towards reconciliation cannot be accomplished by simply changing the curriculum, inviting in an Elder for a one-time talk, or by gathering additional learning resources. Instead, it is vital that educators examine their positionality and perspectives, and to understand where their responsibilities lie in this work. The few strands of scholarship emerging in this area recognize the

importance of relationality and critical pedagogy supporting Indigenous knowledges (Siemens, 2017). Yet few, if any, provide concrete examples of what reconciliation looks like or why an educator's role is so vital in bringing this work forward to the next generation of Canadians.

### **Connecting TRC Principles to Actions**

As educators dedicated to the work of reconciliation, the principles outlined by the TRC (2015b) provide a guiding framework for how to establish good relations moving forward (see the Appendix). These principles remind us how to conduct ourselves ethically as educators, and how to design our classroom pedagogy to be reflective and mindful of creating a new generation of ethical citizens. As a beginning point, the first two principles advanced by the TRC, where citizens are reminded of the inherent rights of the First Peoples of Canada, underscore the fact that reconciliation is not optional; rather, reconciliation is framed on the recognition of inherent rights of Indigenous peoples that can, and must be, recognized as legal rights that make the case for mandatory inclusion in our classrooms. The national and international covenants cited in these principles underscore the rights-based stance that Indigenous peoples hold in this regard.

From an educational standpoint, the third principle of public truth sharing, apology, and commemoration affirms the importance of visible truth-telling within mainstream institutions and settings, including schools. We are reminded that political leadership has a primary role in modelling truth-telling but as educators we hold equal responsibility in sharing the truths of how our nation came to be, and how it is currently governed, with our students. The days of ignoring or disguising these hard truths can no longer be tolerated.

The fourth principle speaks to the importance of taking action within the realm of education to address inequities. In recognizing the importance of constructive action, the Commissioners are not only making a case for this national study to be read and discussed, they are also asking us to move the 94 Calls to Action into the realm of praxis-based learning. This principle underscores the importance of decolonizing education so that teachers can move forward with greater understanding and empathy for the ways in which colonialism impacts their own classroom. For instance, educators must understand that a strong distrust and fear of schooling from Canada's First Peoples stems from previous negative experiences in schools where these adverse feelings are passed on to their children. As a result, the blame for low attendance rates and high disengagement from schools cannot be placed on Indigenous peoples. By creating positive experiences for the children, and their families, educators can begin to rebuild trust and a sense of belongingness essential to reconciliation.

From an educational standpoint, the fifth principle speaks to the realities of a major funding gap between on-reserve and provincially funded schools. This inequity makes it impossible for on-reserve schools to provide the same level of services and staffing to their students that other schools take for granted. We are also reminded of the importance of provision of basic life necessities for learners who live in poverty as well as providing a place of security for those who face challenging home environments.

In the sixth principle, Canadians are reminded of the breadth of the learning community where it is not only teachers that create the learning environment but also includes those who have regular contact with Aboriginal learners and their extended families. In looking at reconciliation at this broader scale, we see a need for educational activities to take place with frontline staff, ranging from the person who answers the phone and greets parents, to the cleaning staff who are a constant presence in the schools.

The seventh and eighth principles highlight the reality that traditional knowledge-keepers and knowledge systems are essential to the work of reconciliation. By valuing Indigenous knowledge traditions on par with Western knowledge through policy and structural changes, we create a sustainable pathway to reconciliation. The ninth principle outlines how this might be accomplished by calling for a new system of shared leadership where this new way is sustained through stable funding support.

The final principle put forward by the TRC speaks directly to the importance of education across the lifespan of national citizens. Here, learning extends beyond formal education to include all places of learning, including the workplace. In this form of public education, citizens are called upon to not only learn about Aboriginal peoples and our nation's colonial history, but to extend that learning into contemporary times. This type of learning is deepened through dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and also includes meaningful exchanges between the young and the old.

The act of reviewing the ten principles of reconciliation through the sight lines of education reminds us that learning takes place not only in schools but also in everyday life. As educators, and as those invested in education, we have the opportunity to imagine what reconciliation might look like through these principles. More importantly, we have the opportunity to bring these visions into being through our respective spheres of influence—all the while recognizing that valuable lessons will be learned along the way. Alongside this important work, we remind our readers that praxis-based learning opportunities, coupled with a healthy dose of creative imagining of possibilities, offer the promise of lifelong and transformative possibilities. Notably, this important work starts with self.

### **Why Reconciliation is Personal**

Writing from the perspective of a Korean-Canadian academic, Chung (2016) suggests that understanding who we are and how that positioning relates to reconciliation is important. Whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, we each have a relationship with national reconciliation—whether from the positioning of an original occupant, settler or newcomer. In order to engage in reconciliation, it is imperative that each of us have a clear grounding of who we are and how this work relates to our positioning. As Regan (2010) reminds us, we each have a critical role in reconciliation, but it is “one that we must find for ourselves” (p. 227).

Once we have a clear grounding in our positionality, we can begin to authentically assess what is needed to advance our own personal roles. As with Graveline's (1998) self-in-relation, Dion (2007) underlines the role of personal perspective using remembrance to examine “what they [non-Indigenous] do not know and what they refuse to know” (p. 331). As educators, we are further inspired by the contributions of reconciliation scholar Regan (2010) who describes this work as a “teaching/learning place of encounter where acts of resistance and freedom occur” (p. 236). She also reminds us that reconciliation involves “accepting personal and political responsibility for shifting colonial attitudes and actions that do not serve us well in our relationships with Indigenous peoples” (p. 217). Fittingly, this process of engagement requires listening with an open heart and cultivating an appreciation for cultural differences that, in turn, allows for deeper understanding to emerge.

In looking at how to position ourselves within reconciliation, Algonquin Anishinaabe-kwe scholar Lyn Gehl (n.d.) reminds those from outside the Indigenous community that “Allies cannot be self-defined” (p. 1). Although a person can claim they are on the path to becoming an ally, true

allies do not label themselves as such. This recognition is an honour that is granted by Aboriginal community members to those who have earned the right to be recognized as allies through their actions and integrity. Once again, those who wish to become allies need to undertake deep self-examination before embarking on the work of reconciliation. Once we understand our personal motives for engaging in this work, we are ready to begin. But, how do we accomplish the work of reconciliation when there is no clear pathway ahead? The following model proposes various entry points into reconciliation regardless of where a person is starting the journey.

### Approaches to Reconciliation

Inspired by the work of Regan (2010) and Chung (2016), our *Approaches to Reconciliation Model* (see Figure 1) identifies three approaches by which individuals can enter the work of reconciliation, regardless of where they start from. This model posits that the work of reconciliation is accessible to all Canadians if they are open to new perspectives, and if they are willing to listen and learn. A person’s past experiences and current level of understanding will influence which of these approaches is most appealing. For those who are new to this learning, the first approach of listening to and learning from Indigenous peoples is a relatively comfortable way to begin as these acts can be accomplished privately, and without any risk of being judged by others. The second approach of walking with and learning from may be most appropriate for those individuals who feel they have some basis of understanding and who feel ready to take their commitment to a public setting. The next stage of working with and learning from Indigenous peoples involves the navigation of complex relationships and the re-balancing of power differentials as the learner begins to learn what they do not know. In our work, we have found that a stance of humility, accompanied by deep listening, is the key that opens up this relational space and makes relationship-building possible.

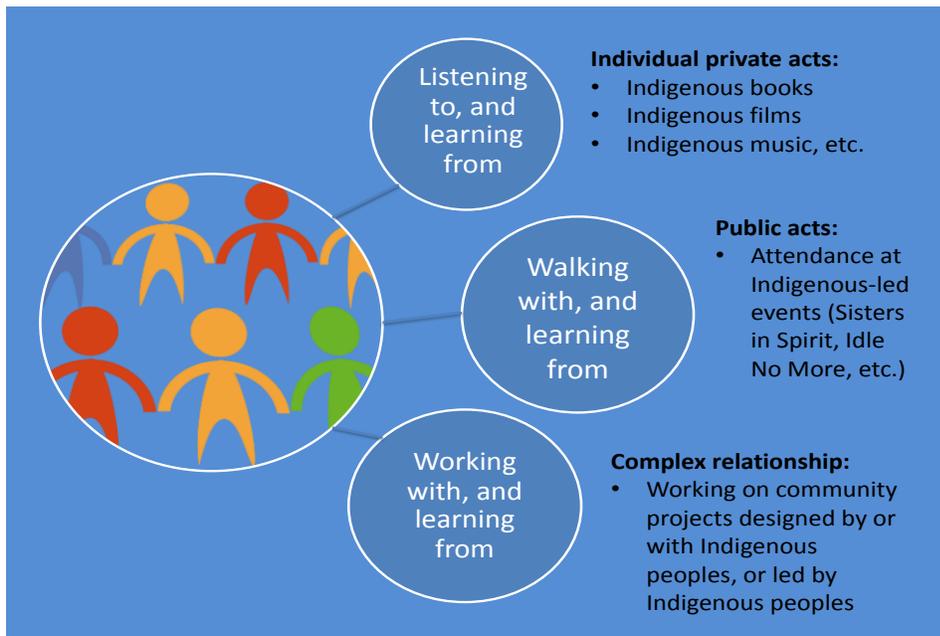


Figure 1: Approaches to Reconciliation Model

## **Listening, Learning, and Self**

The journey towards reconciliation begins with listening—not in a reactive or shallow way that results in guilt or outrage but in a deeply reflective way—where the listener continually asks the question: what action can I take to reconcile? In this initial stage, attempts at reconciliation might be as simple as turning on the television and watching the *Aboriginal Peoples Television Network* or listening to musical artists such as *A Tribe Called Red* or the Cree singer Buffy St. Marie. For those who prefer a visual way of learning, watching films from an Indigenous perspective, such as *The Pass System*, *Smoke Signals*, or even the heartbreaking film, *We Were Children*, may be an option. Written works by Indigenous authors such as Thomas King and Marilyn Dumont represent another accessible media form for interested citizens to examine their positioning within Canadian society. What is important at this stage is the intention of learning behind the act.

In beginning this journey, two considerations are essential. The learner needs to understand that the people they are listening to—whether it is through a television program, a film, or a novel—are representing a glimpse into their lived experiences from a particular region or community in a particular era. In other words, it is essential in these early stages that we recognize that these representations are not applicable to all Indigenous peoples across Canada. The diversity of Indigenous peoples is enormous and spans vast geographical, linguistic, and cultural boundaries. Secondly, while these media forms may present themselves as entertainment, we must remember they are also powerful learning opportunities. If listening and learning is meant to be the beginning of a journey to reconciliation, these experiences must be accompanied by critical reflection where the learner considers the message underlying the media piece and why the story is being told. The act of listening, deep listening, invites an understanding of the experiences of the First Peoples of Canada. With the diversity of Indigenous peoples across Canada, a good place to begin is to “start where you’re at”; in other words, begin your journey by gaining an understanding of the Indigenous peoples on whose lands you reside.

In honouring this lesson, our program begins by acknowledging and introducing our students to local First Nations Elders on the first day and by the ongoing involvement of Elders throughout our ten days together in the summer. By positioning the First Peoples as central to the students’ learning and understanding of place, the students in our program begin to develop an awareness of how deeply connected First Peoples are to the land and to the place we now call Canada. By listening to stories of ancestral connections, many students will be challenged to re-orient their positioning relative to the First Peoples of Canada. Further, by listening to the stories shared by Indigenous peers in the first and final day sharing circles, the students develop a greater understanding of how the First Peoples have experienced colonialism in their personal and professional lives. In hearing these stories, colonial realities exist as living truths in class rather than historical facts that have no living connections to the learners.

## **Walking With, and Learning from, Indigenous Peoples**

The next approach of walking with, and learning from, are public declarations—announced through physical presence—that a person stands alongside Indigenous peoples in their pursuit for justice. This is a more public act than the previous stage. A learner may choose to attend Indigenous events that are open to the public, such as listening to a featured speaker or attending a pow-wow in their area. Other examples of activities that could help facilitate the learning process

range from attending a National Indigenous Day event to actively participating in public rallies, such as the *Sisters in Spirit* vigils (where people display support for the families of murdered and missing Indigenous women and girls across Canada). In these spaces where the learner is physically present, they are demonstrating public support for Indigenous peoples and their rights. Here, the participant continues to learn through dialogue with Indigenous peoples and their supporters. As before, it is important that those in this stage walk beside Indigenous peoples with a desire to learn, balanced with a sense of humility and openness. As Gehl (n.d.) reminds us, the needs of non-Indigenous people “take a back seat” in the work of reconciliation.

Walking with Indigenous peoples is best suited to an individual who has gained a good grounding in the history of, and issues facing, Indigenous peoples. Once a learner has gained this deeper understanding, their public presence in standing alongside and supporting Indigenous peoples holds more significance. As a potential ally, the learner positions themselves as a witness where attention remains focused on the speakers or knowledge-keepers. Regan (2010) maintains, “We bear witness and in doing so, we accept responsibility for making change in the world” (p. 230). Working with tribal members of the Ohlone nation, sociologist Erich Steinman (2011) came to understand that, in many cases, Indigenous community members preferred that students listen and learn from tribal members before, or instead of, taking action—a form of witnessing (p. 6). Listening deeply can be challenging but is ultimately more authentic since it requires patience and reflection while at the same time halting any overzealous need to fix the situation. By avoiding the rush to provide a quick fix, we honour and advance the self-determination of First Peoples.

This next stage is exemplified in our program through the final days of the summer courses. Once students have gained a solid foundation of knowledge around Indigenous perspectives and Canada’s colonial past, they are poised to take their knowledge “outside” of the classroom. We plan a series of field trips where students are engaged in public learning of counter-perspectives. At the downtown art gallery, students are introduced to Indigenous artists who convey provocative perspectives, and on-reserve, students experience firsthand encounters with residential school survivors as well as contemporary reclamations of Indigenous learning spaces. In our final days together in the summer, students are invited by our resident Elder to take part in a ReDress ceremony on-campus that honours the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls of Canada. The settler students also begin to position themselves as allies by publicly demonstrating their support of Indigenous peoples through this on-campus event. In this stage of walking with, and learning from, the students are often called upon by interested bystanders to explain the background and rationale for their involvement. Through these various outings, the learners are listening to Indigenous truths and making a personal connection to their learning in a collective setting.

### **Working With, and Learning from Indigenous Peoples (Taking Action)**

In this stage, the learner has gained a more complex understanding of colonial history and Indigenous perspectives through the “walking with” stage. This stage represents a scaffolding from collaborative learning into a more personal journey of reconciliation. Notably, this stage holds the potential to unsettle even those who believe they have gained sufficient experience and knowledge for this complex work as they encounter institutional resistance and barriers. In this stage of action, those who are embarking on the work of reconciliation discover surprising, and even shocking, personal truths about those who will stand with them, and those who will not, in this difficult work. This is learning that will last a lifetime.

This “working with and learning from” approach within our model is one that we have deliberately taken up within our own teaching practices through praxis-based learning opportunities (Poitras Pratt & Danyluk, 2017). We believe that the lessons of reconciliation are accessible to all Canadians who are willing to listen and learn. In a Canadian educational context, we define reconciliatory pedagogy as all learning related to reconciliation. In this work, praxis-driven learning—such as that found within critical service-learning—deepens the learning experience such that the abstract concept of reconciliation translates into meaningful action through deep reflection. This substantial shift in how learners see the world is transformative learning in its deepest sense. We continue our research into praxis-based learning inspired by the graduate students who have enrolled in the graduate program, “Indigenous Education: A Call to Action,” and their own responses to the Calls to Action guided by our program.

### **Realizing Reconciliatory Pedagogy: How we Imagined What Was Possible**

In 2016, a group of four Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators came together to imagine and design an educator-led response to the TRC’s Calls to Action (2015c). Structured as a one-year graduate pathway program leading to a Masters in Education (M.Ed.),<sup>1</sup> this program is comprised of four courses. The two on-campus summer courses focus on the need for academic and aesthetic approaches to decolonizing. The summer courses provide a rich opportunity to come together as a learning community where an ethos of collectivism is nurtured through shared learning experiences. The 12-week fall course delves into critical service-learning literature and supports the students through the steps involved in a co-design of a community project. In the final 12-week winter course, students enact their capstone project and reflect on the overall experience. Since its launch, our “Call to Action” program has regularly attracted Indigenous and non-Indigenous working professionals; many are practicing or veteran teachers, some are newer to the teaching profession, some arrive from healthcare, social work, and/or counselling realms, and still others come as self-professed activists. Most arrive anxious but committed.

In creating a program that seeks to reveal the truths of our shared past, we ensured traditional teachings were incorporated alongside theoretical concepts from Indigenous scholars and respected allies. Further, by having Elders and other knowledge-keepers present throughout the 10 days of the summer program, we ensure our students are immersed in authentic learning (Poitras Pratt, Lalonde, Hanson & Danyluk, 2017). The privilege of having wisdom-keepers as a continual presence in our classrooms ensures traditional perspectives are authentically relayed and that students have consistent access to Elders when they have questions or need counsel. To ensure students understand the scope of Indigenous knowledge traditions and the impacts of a colonial past, students are taught in the classroom, on the land, and through ceremony. Our curriculum deliberately embraces an aesthetic approach to learning and teaching, inspired by the work of Robinson and Martin (2016) who propose that “sensory stimuli—image, sound, and movement—have social and political effects through our affective engagements with them” (p. 2). Our classroom setting transforms each day through a series of learning tasks that challenge the students to move beyond the print tradition, and into the realm of imagination and possibilities (Greene, 1995). Through a creative and collective approach to imagining what reconciliation might look

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<sup>1</sup> The “Indigenous education: A call to action” program is featured on the website of the Werklund School of Education at the University of Calgary:

<https://werklund.ucalgary.ca/gpe/programs-specializations/master-education-med-interdisciplinary-route/indigenous-education-call>

like and inspired by Donald's (2012) work, our students honour individual perspectives woven into a collaborative Métissage performance as their final summer learning task. By weaving intense personal learning experiences with their peers, our students - who are both Indigenous and non-Indigenous - begin to engage with the difficult work of reconciliation in a thoughtful, yet non-threatening manner, all the while respecting and honouring the different perspectives and lived experiences of their fellow learners.

In the fall, students begin an online course that guides them through critically engaged scholarship on service-learning as they begin to hone their vision of reconciliation. Students begin this process by creating a presentation which describes their positioning in anticipation of a meeting with a potential community partner. At the meeting, students present a brief outline of their skill sets as well as a tentative project idea that addresses at least one of the TRC's 94 Calls to Action to their chosen community partner. Students are encouraged to keep an open attitude in these meetings and to listen carefully to what their community partner has to say. In this way, the two parties can determine if they can come together to enact some form of reconciliation or if the project idea is unfeasible. As they move into the final winter course, students work with their community partner to enact a shared vision of reconciliation. At this point, the settler students are reminded of the necessity of supporting the work of Indigenous peoples as opposed to taking over or believing they have the answers. Ideally, the service-learning project should build on work that their partner is already working on or has in mind, but in more than a few cases, our students are advocating for the necessity of reconciliatory work.

Since our students arrive from a variety of professions and from across the nation, their choice of community partners varies widely: ranging from urban and on-reserve schools to school boards, to family and child services organizations, to on-reserve and urban policing and justice entities, to not-for-profit groups, to Indigenous communities. Of interest, many of our Indigenous students have chosen to work with non-Indigenous groups to help increase the group's overall awareness of colonization and its impacts. In a few cases, even the most well-thought out and carefully designed plans with willing partners fell through, with no fault ascribed to either party. This is one of the perceived risks in the work of reconciliation. Our students have taught us that reconciliatory pedagogy - whatever the outcome - is always worthwhile, as doing nothing represents the greatest risk of all. We offer the following section as a way of sharing some of the lessons learned along this praxis-based pathway, including how to diminish some of the risks within this work.

### **Risks in Reconciliation**

As academics who are not only researching the topic of reconciliation within Canada but also encouraging others to respond to the Calls to Action, we have witnessed how deeply committed our students are in responding to the TRC Calls to Action (Poitras Pratt et al., 2018). While this same commitment is voiced from scholars and practitioners across the nation, we are deliberately moving beyond theorizing to a place of engagement and action. Within this reconciliatory landscape, we have found that even the most well-intended citizens can fall into unexpected pitfalls. One of these risks lies with the positioning of the ally-to-be and their openness to learning. In other words, have they engaged in the work of critical reflection around their own positioning and responsibilities? Without looking at how you are personally implicated in the colonial project, non-Indigenous citizens may be narrowly focused on helping "those" poor people

thereby adopting a savior stance. This type of helping can ultimately disempower those whom you are trying to help, and further entrenches a binary positioning of us and them.

Another risk is that those who have only been recently introduced to the topic will assume the stance of an “instant expert.” Here, a bit of knowledge can become a powerful weapon yielded against fellow citizens, family members, and work colleagues. Oftentimes this type of positioning signals that the person has forgotten the value of humility where the requisite openness to learning has diminished. Still others may align themselves so radically with the cause that their own identity becomes obscured, and the possibility of becoming a “wannabe” where the person assumes a preferred identity (read Indigenous) over that of their own cultural identity looms large.

A further risk lies with those who take a check-box approach to the work of reconciliation. For instance, some may feel that the increasing inclusion of traditional land acknowledgements at formal events is sufficient action in terms of reconciliation. Certainly, the honouring of the original occupants of the land is an honourable act that should continue at all events; however, this protocol represents a beginning and not an end point. Alongside land acknowledgements, educators and other leaders should be simultaneously implementing reconciliatory actions that address the systemic nature of colonialism. Understanding that the work of reconciliation is ongoing and evolving works against another danger—the idea that reconciliation is a trend, or a buzzword, that will fade over time.<sup>2</sup> Certainly, undoing centuries of injustice will take time and determination; however, the ongoing attempts to reconcile are what really matters. Finally, even with awareness of the ways to avoid the more apparent perils of this work, another hazard seems to be ever present: that of those committed to this work becoming overwhelmed and eventually burned out. The passion that is needed to take up this work is also the spark that can lead to major burnout. This last observation is one that reminds us that this work does not rest with Indigenous peoples alone; rather it underscores the moral obligation and need for more allies supporting this work.

### Concluding Thoughts

Currently, the path to reconciliation is one that holds no clear pathway; nevertheless, we are forging ahead with hope and possibilities as guiding beacons. In setting out on this path, we accept the reality there is no straightforward formula that guarantees success or even an arrival point. With this in mind, we recognize reconciliation as an ongoing process, and not an endpoint. Our graduate program has been carefully and intentionally designed to provide our students with both theoretical and experiential lessons that provide them with a strong foundation of understanding. At the same time, we recognize the path to reconciliation is deeply personal and connected to our own experiences so there is no set template for what a reconciliatory project might entail. We do know that for each of us the work of reconciliation involves listening and learning - whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous - and entering the work with a clear understanding of our own ethical positioning.

In asking ourselves, what action can I take to reconcile, we position ourselves as learners. Whether we are new Canadians or have been here for millennia, most of us are only beginning to understand the insidious repercussions of colonialism. From a settler positioning, listening and learning involves accepting hard truths, including the recognition of benefits gained from a colonial past, as part of our shared history (Regan, 2010, p. 235). For Indigenous peoples, the

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<sup>2</sup> Kesler (as cited in Hamilton, 2017) cautions that instead of looking for outcomes that signal we have reached the goal of reconciliation, “Canada should instead measure whether relationships between non-Indigenous and Indigenous communities have improved” (p. 10).

learning might involve gaining a greater understanding of how a colonial past has had a detrimental impact on our families and other loved ones. In learning this history, caution must be taken to not be overtaken by negative emotions that can hinder further growth and learning. The ability to listen deeply is one that improves with practice; however, it is the learning that results from the listening that truly signals you are on the path to authentic change.

The fact that the journey towards reconciliation is uncharted, and full of unexpected twists and turns, can make the work seem untenable. Yet in spite of the risks that are an inevitable part of this work, the rewards of moving towards reconciliation can have, and will have, positive implications for generations to come. As educators, we are motivated and ready to share the lessons we have learned in taking on the work of reconciliation through a praxis-based approach. By recognizing and valuing the deep roots and knowledges that the First Peoples hold in this land we now call Canada, our nation can take the necessary steps towards reconciliation where Canadian identity is built on a strong foundation of lessons learned through hard truths. Whether Indigenous or non-Indigenous, young or old, educator or learner, having the will and the courage to take these first steps is where we see this valuable work moving forward and for a growing group of “Call to Action” students is well underway.

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## Appendix

### Principles of Reconciliation<sup>3</sup>

1. The United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples is the framework for reconciliation at all levels and across all sectors of Canadian society.
2. First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples, as the original peoples of this country and as self-determining peoples, have Treaty, constitutional, and human rights that must be recognized and respected.
3. Reconciliation is a process of healing of relationships that requires public truth sharing, apology, and commemoration that acknowledge and redress past harms.
4. Reconciliation requires constructive action on addressing the ongoing legacies of colonialism that have had destructive impacts on Aboriginal peoples' education, cultures and languages, health, child welfare, the administration of justice, and economic opportunities and prosperity.
5. Reconciliation must create a more equitable and inclusive society by closing the gaps in social, health, and economic outcomes that exist between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal Canadians.
6. All Canadians, as Treaty peoples, share responsibility for establishing and maintaining mutually respectful relationships.
7. The perspectives and understandings of Aboriginal Elders and Traditional Knowledge Keepers of the ethics, concepts, and practices of reconciliation are vital to long-term reconciliation.
8. Supporting Aboriginal peoples' cultural revitalization and integrating Indigenous knowledge systems, oral histories, laws, protocols, and connections to the land into the reconciliation process are essential.
9. Reconciliation requires political will, joint leadership, trust building, accountability, and transparency, as well as a substantial investment of resources.
10. Reconciliation requires sustained public education and dialogue, including youth engagement, about the history and legacy of residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal rights, as well as the historical and contemporary contributions of Aboriginal peoples to Canadian society.

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<sup>3</sup> Original document available in the public domain at:  
[http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Principles\\_English\\_Web.pdf](http://nctr.ca/assets/reports/Final%20Reports/Principles_English_Web.pdf)