

Inspired to Face the Hurdles:  
A Non-Indigenous Educator's  
Experience Facilitating the  
Integration of Aboriginal  
Perspectives into Education

Laura Sims, Ph.D.

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## Abstract

Integrating Aboriginal perspectives into education is important when aiming to address long-standing inequalities, injustices, and misunderstandings due to negative stereotypes and racism faced by Aboriginal peoples in Canada. As a non-Indigenous Canadian educator and ally in this process, it has not always been obvious to me in practical terms how I might best support, with dignity and respect, Aboriginal perspectives in education (i.e., what does integrating Aboriginal perspectives actually *mean*? what should I be *doing* in my pedagogy? where do I *begin*?). The purpose of this paper is to share my experience of how I negotiated the role as a facilitator of learning in general, and of learning Indigenous knowledges in particular, when teaching the *Aboriginal Perspectives in Education* course to first-year Bachelor of Education students. Contextualized within relevant literature, this paper is an exploration of how I approached and implemented the course. Specifically, I explore the following: my role as educator in the learning process, my goals for the course, and my approach to building a nurturing learning community, yet one where basic assumptions could be critiqued. I also discuss how the course was implemented in a participatory way, in collaboration with students and with the support of community members. The result, according to formal and informal course evaluations and feedback, was a positive learning journey for students despite the rather uncomfortable stories that had to be discussed.

## Introduction

Sometimes circumstances force you to do things that are outside of your comfort zone. Two years ago I was invited to teach the *Aboriginal Perspectives in Education* course to first-year Bachelor of Education students at the Université de Saint-Boniface,<sup>1</sup> in Winnipeg, Manitoba. This course, mandated since 2008 in Manitoba, was the result of over a decade of consultation, research, and curricular development enacted in the face of a burgeoning Aboriginal population and low graduation rates (Manitoba, 2007). To teach this course was an honour, a wonderful opportunity, and an enormous responsibility; it also presented quite a daunting task. Daunting as a non-Indigenous educator, wondering if I had the legitimacy to teach this course, and daunting as, across Manitoba, the course comes with a reputation of being a struggle to implement.<sup>2</sup> So, after much consultation with my Aboriginal colleagues from across Manitoba, but particularly with those at the English-speaking universities, I accepted the offer to

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1 The Université de Saint-Boniface is western Canada's only French-speaking university.

2 *Aboriginal/Indigenous Foundational Frameworks for Teacher Development—The Manitoba Perspective*. Conference panel presentation given at the Canadian Society for the Study of Education at Congress of the Humanities, University of Victoria (June 4, 2013), and at a MERN Treaties and Reconciliation seminar at the University of Brandon (June 7, 2013). This panel was a collaboration among David Anderson and Sherry Peden, University College of the North; Marlene Atleo, Frank Deer, Laara Fitznor, University of Manitoba; Kevin Lamoureux, University of Winnipeg; and Laura Sims, Université de Saint-Boniface.

teach the course. These colleagues, and the other Aboriginal community members who shared their knowledge with my students and me, were by far my greatest gift. They were welcoming and supportive, and had faith in my abilities and agreed to accompany me through the process. This experience of teaching the course, I can honestly say, has been a deeply enriching one as an educator and as a Canadian—particularly with respect to understanding responsibilities, bridging communities, building hope, and creating future possibilities. In appreciating the importance and value of this course in terms of transforming Canadian society through education to be more equitable, respectful, and inclusive, I was nervous and a bit scared. Often when dealing with potentially uncomfortable subject matter, it is hard to know where to begin, and consequently we are paralyzed by our uncertainty.

Members of the Manitoba Education Research Network (MERN) Indigenous Education Research Group collaborate to promote Aboriginal education. As a member, and as a non-Indigenous Canadian educator and ally in this process, it has not always been obvious to me in practical terms how I might best support, with dignity and respect, Aboriginal perspectives in education (i.e., what does integrating Aboriginal perspectives actually *mean*? what should I be *doing* in my pedagogy? where do I *begin*?). The purpose of this paper is to share my experience of how I negotiated the role as a facilitator of learning in general, and of learning Indigenous knowledges in particular, when teaching the *Aboriginal Perspectives in Education* course. It is meant to contribute to the discussion of how theory (Deer, 2013; Kanu, 2005, 2011; St. Denis, 2007) might best be put into practice. It is also meant to help other, especially non-Indigenous, educators to reflect on our potential roles and responsibilities when it comes to Aboriginal education.

## Context of the Course

Many reasons exist as to why it is important to integrate Aboriginal perspectives in education. There are a lot of negative stereotypes around, and racism towards, Aboriginal peoples in Canada (Comack, Deane, Morissette, & Silver, 2009; Kanu, 2005; St. Denis, 2007). To help eliminate these and other injustices, there is a need for an education system to be genuinely inclusive and “responsive to the challenges of diversity and difference in public schooling” (Kanu, 2011, p. 49). Kanu (2005) argues that the goal of integration is to address “inequalities that have for generations produced economic, social, and educational inequity for Aboriginal peoples” (p. 66). With respect to effectively integrating Aboriginal perspectives into educational practice in schools, there are certain unique challenges. A problematic historical legacy results in discomfort, tension, and guilt around discussing issues and potential integration of Aboriginal perspectives into school curriculum (Deer, 2013). Often, teachers experience an apprehension around lack of knowledge (Kanu, 2005). Furthermore, non-Indigenous teachers lack confidence in their knowledge about Aboriginal perspectives and content and are afraid that their knowledge will be perceived as illegitimate or not genuine

(Kanu, 2011). Notwithstanding these challenges, St. Denis (2007) argues that we must acknowledge that race matters and that it is time for telling uncomfortable stories.

When faced with teaching future teachers how to integrate Aboriginal perspectives, Kanu (2011) stresses the need to create a community that is supportive and nurturing yet also one where basic assumptions can be critiqued. She encourages us as educators to go through the difficult challenge of questioning our own assumptions and allowing students to do the same. Indeed, Kanu's (2005) study found that changing teachers' attitudes is key if we are to successfully integrate Aboriginal perspectives into schooling. She invites us to see curriculum not only as a course of study but also as a running of a personal experience, what she calls *currere*. Kanu (2011) invites us to see curriculum as conversation with a goal of understanding. She writes of the need to share power in the learning process, to acknowledge the rich knowledge and experiences that students and community members bring to the discussion. She argues that our goal at university should be to help teachers build capacity (i.e., knowledge of subject matter) and build a supportive network of resources to increase their sense of efficacy for integrating Aboriginal perspectives. When faced with the challenge of addressing the legacy of colonization, Kanu (2011) stresses the need to present "knowledge that balances the strength of Aboriginal peoples with the problems they face and an analysis of the social, economic, and political roots of these problems" (p. 215). This would provide learners (i.e., future teachers) with a more accurate picture (Kanu, 2011) and a greater appreciation for the resilience of Aboriginal peoples. Indeed, Kanu (2011) found that presenting these "counter-stories" promoted higher cognitive skills and enabled better understanding of issues allowing negative stereotypical ideas to be transformed. With regard to appropriate methods for integrating Aboriginal perspectives into teaching, Kanu (2005, 2011) stresses the need for being innovative. Methods could include the following: storytelling, guest speakers, field trips, learning scaffolds, discussion circles, journal writing, and small-group projects. St. Denis (2007) also encourages the incorporation of cultural traditions and practices. Serendipitously, based on previous teaching and research experience, I had worked out many of these principles intuitively prior to teaching the course. With relief and joy, I found that Kanu's work brought validation and provided a theoretical context to the approach I had taken.

So, with humility, an open heart, a goal of integrating authentic voices and identifying key messages, and a desire to make this course a positive learning journey, I started planning the course. I thought a lot about the learning environment and relationships, and I thought through my goals and how I would accomplish them. Final formal and informal student course evaluations, student feedback, student journals, and personal observation of student attitudes and levels of participation in activities (over the past two years and with the past four groups) confirmed that these goals had been successfully met.

### *My Role in the Learning Process*

In teaching this course as a university educator, I did not see myself as an expert but rather a facilitator of knowledge acquisition, as one who could adequately share the *raison d'être* behind the importance of integrating Aboriginal perspectives into education, as one who could create safe platforms for Aboriginal elders and guests to share their stories, as one who could guide and challenge students through critical discussions towards a greater understanding, as one who could accompany students through the self-reflective and often soul-searching journey of facing our colonial legacies, and as one who could enable students to acquire the skills to effectively and confidently integrate Aboriginal perspectives into their future pedagogy. My attitude is that you start where you are and you bring what you can; use your strengths to do your best. I agree with St. Denis (2007) that we are all part of the solution—we all must unpack the racism that we have all inherited.

### *My Goals for the Course*

My goals for the course were to inspire, raise awareness, open minds, teach respect, share stories, and promote critical reflection. I wanted to create a course where students were able and courageous enough to critically face our colonial legacy and one where they leave inspired and able to integrate Aboriginal pedagogies and content into their own teaching practices. To do this, it was important to create a community of learners that was supportive, honest, trustful, authentic, and non-judgmental. Appreciating how limited our time together was, I wanted students to acquire the tools and develop the desire to continue exploring the issues and the possibilities for themselves.

### *Identifying Strengths*

With these goals in mind, I identified my strengths as an individual and those of my institution. With respect to the strengths I bring to the teaching of this course, my research, in very broad terms, has allowed me to explore, test, and evaluate how to create learning forums involving various actors in society that enable a transition towards a more equitable and environmentally sustainable society (see Sims, 2012; Sims & Falkenberg, 2013; Sims & Sinclair, 2008). My teaching has often focused on questions of diversity, equity, and social justice. My approach is participatory, critical, and interdisciplinary. Lessons learned from these experiences contributed to the creation of the learning environment, to my pedagogical approach, and to understanding the learning that resulted from participation in the course.

There are many factors at my institution that benefit the successful implementation of this course. To begin, the first-year B.Ed. cohort consists of two classes of about 20 students each; classes run for two-hour slots, two times

per week. This combination of relatively small class sizes and longer class slots is beneficial as it allows us to discuss topics in some depth. Next, I requested to teach the course in the winter term, after having taught all the students an introductory course on *Cultural Diversity in Education*. This allowed me to introduce the broad themes of prejudice and discrimination and the importance of inclusion and tolerance in education between September and December. It also allowed me to begin the process of building a trustful relationship with students (and they with each other) over time before discussing the topic of Aboriginal perspectives. I think that these factors were strong contributors to the success of the course.

### *Planning the Course*

When initially planning the course, I involved the students in the planning process, explaining the rationale for why the course and assignments were structured the way they were (e.g., the broad themes, proposed speakers, cultural activities, nature of assignments) in order to get their input. Significantly, this had the effect of getting students excited about the course and what they were going to learn. At different times before and during the course, student input was sought in decision making around which themes they wanted to explore in more depth. I considered the course as our collective responsibility. For example, this year (2014) together we decided that we wanted to visit the Manitoba Indigenous Cultural Education Centre, Inc., and Neechi Commons to see examples of non-formal and formal educational resources that exist for and in the community. For most students, it was their first visit to these organizations, and for some, their first visit to the community of Point Douglas. Throughout its implementation, students were asked to provide constructive feedback on activities and, at the end, to evaluate the course. In getting student input and involvement in the planning and evaluation process, I wanted to model the approach I was trying to teach (e.g., being flexible to accommodate learners' needs and interests, sharing decision-making power) (Alberta Education, 2005; Kanu, 2011; Sims, 2012).

### *Implementing the Course*

In order to cultivate positive attitudes and help build capacity, I wanted to inspire students and help them understand and contextualize how important integrating Aboriginal perspectives into education is for all of us to do. I wanted them to understand how this could help create a more just and equitable society and how much power we have as educators in terms of enabling this transition. Kanu (2011) argues that in understanding our impact, we will be more resilient and persistent when facing potential challenges. Although this was not a "Native Studies" course per se, I recognized that it was important to scaffold students' learning around historical events and current challenges facing Aboriginal communities specifically and Canadians generally. Personal experience has shown me that many mainstream Canadians are unaware of historical and political events that have had negative impacts on Aboriginal peoples. For example,

many of my students had little or no knowledge of residential schools and/or did not appreciate their impact on the Aboriginal community and/or did not see the relationship behind this policy of assimilation with some of the current challenges—such as sense of identity, substance abuse, violence, and poverty (Comack et al., 2009).

I designed the course so that the beginning focused on providing a background of important aspects/events that are critical to understanding the issues facing the Aboriginal communities.<sup>3</sup> These stories and teachings aimed at facilitating a more critical understanding of our collective contemporary reality as they relate to a colonial legacy. They provide the context behind many of the challenges we face today and they also provide the context for appreciating how resilient (and generous!) the Aboriginal communities are. These stories and teachings helped students begin to understand what “Aboriginal perspectives” means in an educational context as common themes emerged from the narratives (e.g., importance of relationships, respect, taking responsibility for and valuing the land). Rather than being linear, the learning process was more cyclical and circular.

It was important that these stories were told from a variety of sources, especially from Aboriginal people who have too often been relegated to the margins. These individuals represented a broad spectrum of voices and experiences from the Aboriginal community (e.g., elders, academics, social workers, writers, lawyers, politicians, educators, business leaders, community activists). Their messages were uplifting, inspiring, yet brutally honest and frank. These guest speakers also provided an opportunity for students to see positive Aboriginal role models. This backgrounder gave students a basic understanding that allowed them to participate in discussions more equitably without feeling ashamed or ignorant.

The second half of the course focused primarily on integrating Aboriginal perspectives into school curricula, in terms of approach and content. An effort was made to understand what was expected by the Department of Education and what resources were available, and then we explored ideas as to how to put what they had learned into practice.

To strengthen teacher-candidates’ capacity and confidence, I wanted to provide them with an overview of the resources available, both formal conventional educational resources (e.g., Direction des ressources éducatives françaises), and community-level resources (e.g., Treaty Relations Commission of Manitoba, Manitoba Metis Federation). Through invited speakers, course activities, assignments, and field trips, I wanted to facilitate direct, meaningful interaction with community contacts so that students could independently bring these people into their own future teaching practice. So, with regard to changing attitudes

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3 These events/issues included, but were not limited to, providing a basic understanding of the following: a brief history of relations from contact to current Idle No More movement; residential schools; treaty relations; the importance of education; Métis identity; organizations that support Aboriginal community development; cultural activities (e.g., sweat lodge, Manitoba Indigenous Writers’ Festival; Living Library; pipe ceremony).

and building capacity to overcome apprehension (Kanu, 2011), good resources (guest speakers, films, readings, outings to community, cultural events) were key, especially when supported with classroom discussion to process what they were learning. Frequently these activities and speakers forced students beyond their comfort zone. Significantly, students often expressed gratitude for the experience.

To further build capacity, I tried to model the pedagogy that I was trying to teach by having students authentically live it through participating in course activities. The course was experiential, involved the community, allowed for the sharing of stories, attempted to take into account each students' unique gifts and learning style, and integrated cultural experiences. Pedagogic strategies included incorporating opportunities for collaborative work, using conceptual frameworks for greater understanding, and autonomous study. The physical space was set up to be equitable and to invite discussion (either desks placed in a large circle or at times clusters—whatever was most appropriate to the activity). In order to create a nourishing, emotionally supportive environment for students and guests where they felt welcome and safe to take risks, time was taken to properly greet students and to inquire as to their well-being. Certain appropriate protocols were learned and followed such as offering tobacco to Aboriginal guests in recognition of the knowledge they were sharing. Tea and fresh baking were served every class—I strongly believe that this sharing helps build community. Within this supportive environment, inviting and asking tough, honest questions of each other was encouraged, particularly questions that pushed us as a community of learners intellectually and emotionally.

The students identified the following attributes as being important qualities in a professor for this course: an instructor/professor should be open-minded, respectful, empathetic, enthusiastic, generous, passionate about the subject matter, and have a non-judgmental and positive attitude. Already having a good relationship with the professor before beginning these discussions was considered by students to be a great asset.

### *Assignments*

As the course progressed, the assignments were designed to support students' progression as critical thinkers, independent learners, and future pedagogues. Particularly at the beginning when the focus was on historical events and current challenges, journaling provided a space for students to reflect on and process what they were learning (Kanu, 2011). For the second assignment, students had to participate in an Aboriginal event or visit an Aboriginal organization or site; they then had to highlight its relevance to the course and/or to their future teaching. This assignment was meant to encourage positive encounters, independence, confidence, the building of relationships with the Aboriginal community, and experiencing Aboriginal culture in its contemporary context. This activity was followed by a sharing circle where students were able to share their experiences. Many students expressed how enriching it had been to discover something

new and to visit a part of Winnipeg that they knew very little about, and how positive it was to have participated in an event that they might not otherwise have experienced. For some students who had participated in an Aboriginal cultural experience (e.g., a sweat lodge or the Festival du Voyageur), they expressed how the experience had changed their lives (e.g., in terms of their sense of self-confidence or their identity as a Métis). I think that this assignment in particular helped students come to know, in a more honest and positive way, a part of our community clouded by prejudice. The third and final assignment was to integrate Aboriginal perspectives (approaches and content) into a teachable subject matter and level of their choosing. They then had to share this activity, in a meaningful, contextualized, and experiential way with the rest of us. Witnessing the creativity, sincerity, breadth, and depth of how they integrated Aboriginal perspectives into their proposed activities was profoundly inspiring.

## Conclusion

Kanu (2011) asks an important question: “What can we do as critical educators and activists to change these inequalities and help create a more just society through our curriculum and pedagogy?” (p. 212). In response to this question I would encourage all of us, particularly those of us who by accident of birth can choose, or choose not, to engage with these issues of discrimination, to be unafraid to discuss the uncomfortable stories in an honest, informed, and supportive way. There is much we can do, particularly if we are willing to see our roles not as experts, but as facilitators of knowledge acquisition. To do this, we as non-Aboriginal people must reach out to the Aboriginal community for guidance as to how best we can support learning and teaching in this area.

I often ask myself why this course, so far, has been so well received. In general, I observed that students were inspired and motivated to come to class. Through course evaluations, students explained that they found the different themes interesting, and they came to understand better the relationship between historical events and current realities that they were witnessing. They appreciated that the discussions were rich and non-judgmental and a clear link was made to educational practice. It is hard to describe, but it felt like there was a real honesty in the course, like we were part of something bigger. I felt that finally we were coming to understand part of our reality in a much more informed way, like a shroud was being lifted off a part of our collective Canadian experience and this process of enlightenment has been profoundly moving for all of us. I agree with Kanu (2011): I think that this course, more than any other I have taught, is a course of study and an emotional journey in teaching and learning, (i.e., curriculum as *currere*).

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