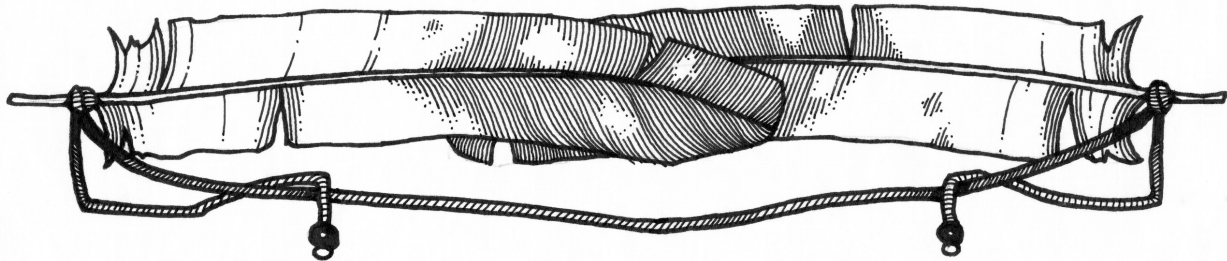# Reconciliation within the Academy: Why is Indigenization so Difficult?

By: **Michael Bopp**, PhD, Four Worlds Centre for Development Learning;
   Lee Brown, PhD (Interior Salish and Chickasaw), Director, Institute of Aboriginal Health and Faculty of Education, UBC (retired);
   Jonathan Robb, Director, Strategic Integration and Stakeholder Relations, NorQuest College[1, 2]

Introduction

The release of The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's 94 "Calls to Action" in 2015 has proven to be a watershed moment in the history of the relationship between Canada and Canadian Indigenous Peoples. Many institutions at many levels began struggling with the process of reconciliation within the framework of their day-to-day operations and mandates.

It is becoming evident to anybody who is closely watching this process unfold in many different settings across the country, that it is a lot harder than it may have seemed at first glance. Typically, everyone starts off with the best of intentions, and often with considerable enthusiasm, but it is not unusual to see what turns out to be a complex change and development processes falter, or even stall somewhere along the way as the rubber hits the road in terms of actual implementation.

In our view, the struggle to implement the Royal Commission on Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women is one such very public process. Struggles between student groups and university authorities in multiple settings across the country over such issues as whether or not to celebrate Canada 150, or whether time honoured historical connections to the origins of the institution should be purged - these are all symptoms of a much deeper struggle that is ongoing in the heart of the academy.

Post-secondary institutions are on the front lines of this change process in our country. A very high proportion of colleges and universities have some kind of "Indigenization" strategy which they are either developing or struggling to implement. This discussion paper will highlight some of the critical realities and obstacles that make the process of "Indigenization" so very challenging. We will go on to suggest ways of working through these challenges, and of supporting and nurturing the processes of growth and development that need to happen in order to reach the goals of a reconciliation agenda.

The observations in this discussion paper are rooted in practice. We have worked with a variety of post-secondary institutions over many years, as instructors and researchers, as the developer and implementer of programs oriented to the learning needs of Indigenous students and communities, and as consultants supporting the institutional learning and change

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[1] To communicate with the authors, please contact Four Worlds Centre for Development Learning (email: anyone@fourworlds.ca).
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processes required for success in meeting the goals of deep reconciliation (or what many refer to as "Indigenization") within the academy. We have also worked as helpers and allies of Indigenous communities in every part of Canada over several decades in support of nation building and community development processes. From this "other side of the fence" perspective, we have had the opportunity to see first-hand what Indigenous people need in their attempts to build effective partnerships with the institutions and programs that are supposed to serve them.

What is Indigenization?

On a very practical level, indigenization is the process of creating a supportive and comfortable space inside our institutions within which Indigenous people can succeed. But "success" is a very big word here. It's not just success in students completing coursework or programs. It is also "success" in reframing knowledge production and transmission within the academy from an Indigenous perspective. (What on earth does that mean?)

It means that most of us as Canadians are woefully ignorant of the history of interaction between Indigenous people and European immigrants who came as settlers to this land. It means that not only were the French and English "founding peoples" of our country, so also, in a much more profound way, were Indigenous people. It means that European institutional frameworks, philosophy, historical assumptions, paradigms of scholarship and ways of knowing have not only dominated our institutions, but completely boxed out Indigenous knowledge, wisdom teachings, science and worldviews. It means that except in certain pockets of the academy, the impact of colonization on Indigenous people is completely invisible. It means that as a result of those historical processes, many Indigenous people come to the academy with trauma based barriers to participation in the learning process. It means that the learning and support processes within the academy need to be reframed in order to accommodate contributions from Indigenous experience. It means that, for Indigenous students, specialized support systems are fundamental to success.

Following are some of the goals and strategies that Canadian post-secondary institutions are currently struggling to implement in order to address these issues. All of these things are part of what is being called "Indigenization".

1. Incorporate Indigenous knowledge, voices, values, symbols, aesthetics, critiques and practices into the ways in which knowledge is produced and shared. (University of Regina). This process should become "natural" (Camosun College) and so thorough that it becomes an essential element of how things are done (University of Regina). The goal is to create a more inclusive environment through the ethical stewardship of a plurality of Indigenous knowledge systems and practices (University of Regina, Camosun College).

2. Involve Indigenous groups and entities in educational decision-making and create partnerships with Indigenous communities, organizations and institutions (Mount Royal University, Justice Institute of British Columbia, NorQuest College).

3. Mentor, support and create epistemic spaces for Indigenous scholars, knowledge holders and wisdom keepers (University of Alberta, Mount Royal University, University of Regina).

4. Become responsive and responsible to the goals and aspirations of Indigenous peoples for self-determination and well-being (University of the Fraser Valley, Algoma University, NorQuest College).

5. Mentor, support and meet the educational needs of Indigenous peoples and their allies and ensure the retention and success of aboriginal learners (Mount Royal University, Justice Institute of British Columbia, Algoma University, Camosun College, NorQuest College). Note

that this strategy requires not only the creation of culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy, but also a re-examination of all the structural layers of an educational institution (e.g. which services are offered and how they are delivered, admissions policies, access to funding support, the look and use of physical space, etc.)

6. Utilize culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy - curriculum in which Indigenous students will see themselves and their realities and that recognizes and values Indigenous ways of knowing (Camosun College, Mount Royal University).

7. Ensure that non-Indigenous students leave their course of study with skills and knowledge that enable them to work with and live alongside their Indigenous neighbours knowledgeably and respectfully (Camosun College).

So what's the problem?

The problem is that all of this is much easier to talk about than it is to do. The problem is that the very nature of the problem of indigenization turns out to be much more complex and difficult than simply implementing a few strategies. Following are some of the primary obstacles and barriers that need to be effectively addressed in order for the process of indigenization to succeed.

As you read through them, you will see that they could be describing characteristics of front-line staff, faculty or even senior administrative leadership. More elusively, much of what is described often manifests itself outside the conscious awareness of principal actors. And finally, these characteristics and behaviours are almost always embedded in the living culture of
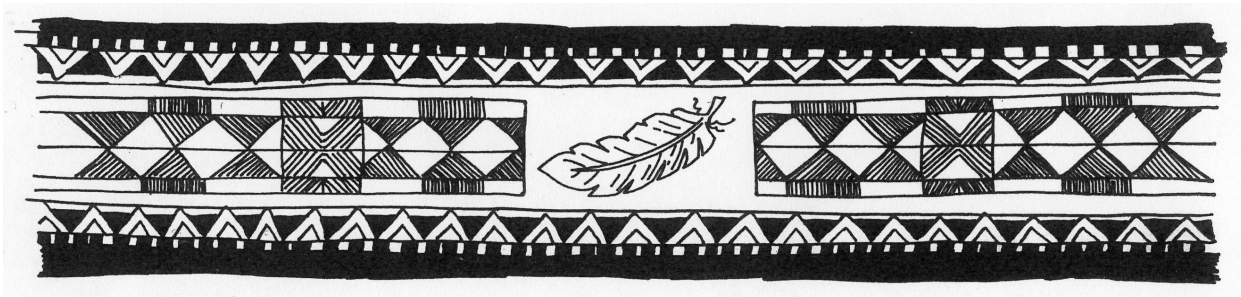
organizations.

Key Barriers to Reconciliation and Indigenization

1. *Lack of Basic Knowledge and Understanding.* People don't know what they don't know. The majority of Canadians, even those working in post-secondary institutions, know very little to nothing about Indigenous history, culture and current realities, except for what they may have heard about in the media. Most people don't know much about the European colonization of the North American continent, and its unrelenting intergenerational impact on Indigenous people. Most people have no idea about the systematic cruelty and oppression to which Canadian Indigenous people were subjected. And consequently, most people don't understand how all of this stuff "from the past" has anything to do with our present day Canadian reality. From this perspective, it's very difficult to see any real need or justification for "reconciliation" or "indigenization".

2. *Intercultural Incompetency.* Cultural competency refers to the capacity of a person or an organization to constructively work with cultural difference in ways that lead to mutual understanding, collaboration and eventually co-creation. You would think that in 21st century Canada, where approximately 50% of us were either born outside the country or are the

children of those who were, we would be very sensitive to cultural difference, and very proactive and effective at building relationships of inclusion. However, most Canadians of the dominant culture (i.e., people of European descent) don't think of themselves as having a culture at all. We think that what we have is "reality". Other people (usually people of colour) have culture, which is manifested in their food, their traditional costumes, their dances, their languages and their strange beliefs, customs and manners. We know that what we have is "reality" because we have the scientific method to prove it.

Of course, very few educated people would overtly subscribe to this perspective. Nevertheless, many subconsciously live it. What this leads to is a characteristic inability to engage with, understand and appreciate cultural differences. Many of us are actually in denial about the fact that Indigenous people are culturally distinct and different from the mainstream. We don't "see" these differences, we don't know how to relate to them if we do see them, and we certainly don't know how to integrate those differences into a collaborative relationship through which we can work together with Indigenous people to build systems and processes that they need or that all of us could benefit from.

3. *Blind Spots and Power Differentials.* If you are a member of the dominant culture, you are very rarely, if ever, aware of that fact. But, if you are a member of a minority culture, you are acutely aware that you are on the outside, and that it is you who is going to have to fit into the dominant culture's way of configuring reality. Colleges and universities are essentially dominant culture institutions run by dominant culture people. Their business as usual way of seeing "reality", with its accompanying set of hidden rules, and its "acceptable" standards of thinking and behaviour is simply assumed. There are certainly people of colour who may be bicultural enough to fit it into the system. But, the system is white. Those running the system are in what is often an unconscious, but nevertheless privileged power position.

When Indigenous people encounter this unconscious culture of superiority, it can be extremely frustrating and demeaning. Many report experiencing continuous assumptions of inferiority, ignorance, deviance or incompetence on the part of those in authority within the system. Some declare this as "racism". It's not surprising that these encounters can lead to anger, misunderstanding and conflict. Nor is it surprising that when Indigenous people share their perspectives on how to move forward with processes that could more effectively serve Indigenous learners and communities, their contributions are quite often not heard, dismissed as impracticable, or ignored.

4. *The Indigenous Liaison Fallacy*. It is certainly not possible to effectively address the core issues of reconciliation within the academy (or any other type of organization) without the full participation and even leadership of Indigenous people. It is equally not possible to succeed in such a process by hiring one or a small team of token Indigenous people, and giving them the responsibility for achieving the outcomes of the process. Yet this is exactly what many school systems, colleges and business organizations have tried to do. Instead of building the capacity of service providers across the whole institution to address the specific needs of Indigenous students, one or a small handful of Indigenous employees are assigned the impossible task of dealing with all the problems and meeting all the needs of Indigenous students, as well as serving as a buffer between Indigenous issues and the organization, somehow improving relationships and outcomes in both directions.

One of the most pervasive reasons for the failure of reconciliation within the academy is the ghettoizing of the indigenization processes and the people trying to carry them out into a "special initiative" that is significantly underfunded, is seen as a short-term soft money "project" outside the normal budget, and even more significantly is situated outside and off to the side of the permanent structures and decision-making processes of the

institution. Until indigenization is brought out of the wilderness of marginalization, mainstreamed across the institution, and given both the resources and institutional support that it needs, it can never really flourish.

Fundamentally, reconciliation is about healing our relationships, and that means all of us. We are all treaty people. In order to achieve the goals of a full-blown indigenization process within a post-secondary institution (or any other institution), Indigenous and non-Indigenous people will have to learn to work together. During this process, both will have things to learn from each other, and both will probably have to change. One profound implication of this insight is that those collaborating to lead the process of reconciliation need to be sufficiently deft at facilitating intercultural processes of mutual exploration, healing and learning, while at the same time being capable of retaining a strategic orientation aimed at continuous improvement of the process.

5. *Underestimating Complexity*. In "Getting to Maybe: How the World is Changed", authors Frances Wesley, Brenda Zimmerman and Michael Quinn Patton described three kinds of problems; simple, complicated and complex. Simple is like baking a cake. You get the ingredients, and follow the directions in the recipe, and you are most likely to end up with a cake. Complicated is like getting a rocket ship to the moon. It involves a huge number of engineering and other technical procedures that need to be strung together, but if you pay careful attention to detail and do everything right, chances are your rocket will get to the moon. Complex is like raising a child or ending AIDS in South Africa. There are many variables that cannot be predicted or controlled. There are subtle undercurrents that can sweep aside diligent efforts to reach a goal.

Indigenization within a post-secondary institution in 21st century Canada is a complex adaptive systems transformation problem. It involves student engagement and support systems, relationships with external communities, transformation of academic disciplines and curricula, transformation of institutional governance and management systems - and all of these involve human beings needing to learn, change and grow. As anyone who has ever tried to work within a post-secondary institution will know, the culture of these organizations is most often quite resistant to change, animated as it is by long-standing traditions anchored within the dominant culture's perceptions of how the world is and must be. And yet, there is no escaping the fact that authentic indigenization challenges the deepest culture of the academy and calls it into the arena of change. Clearly, this is a process that requires enlightened leadership.

There is currently a debate raging in post-secondary institutions across Canada about whether there should be mandatory courses for students introducing them to Indigenous culture, history and identity. Many are also arguing for mandatory training for academic and support staff within colleges and universities. While these are important issues, it is clear to most seasoned observers that adding a little Indigenous art here, a few new courses there, and perhaps an Indigenous student Centre is really only the very tip of the iceberg. These are all good things, but there is a lot more to do after those things have been done. Underestimating the complexity and, thus, the long-term commitment to learning and growth for continuous improvement that is required for success can reduce a well-intentioned process of responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action shallow and ineffectual tokenism.

6. *Paradigm Wars*. Within the academic world, there is a long tradition of competition for dominance within almost every discipline, as well as across disciplines. Each subgroup strives to put forward what they believe to be the most comprehensive models, theories and explanations of whatever phenomena they are studying. In fact, the academy is

characterized by competing disciplinary and paradigmatic "territories", and competition is fierce because the rewards translate into research dollars, influence and notoriety within the academic world, staff positions, as well as power and influence within the structure of the institution.

Indigenous knowledge holders, wisdom keepers, Elders and scholars come to the academy with a worldview that has been 10,000 years in the making, and continues to grow and evolve. These ways of knowing and interpreting reality, and the philosophical principles that guide action emerging from an Indigenous worldview often produces a very different understanding of what is happening in the world and what to do about it. One view is that this entire universe of meaning making should be relegated to a discipline like "Indigenous Studies", or in other words academically ghettoized, and therefore marginalized in terms of intellectual importance and actual influence within the institution, including budgets, staffing, office space and decision-making power. Another view is that Indigenous thinking should be able to take its place as a valid perspective among others within every discipline within the academy. The problem of how a particular philosophical or scientific perspective fits itself into the complex interdisciplinary world of the academy is not new. However, within the framework of indigenization, the challenge is compounded by heavily charged issues of identity, human rights, and the urgent need for reconciliation between Canada and Canadian Indigenous people.

From an Indigenous perspective, the reality of a scientific or social problem can best be understood in terms of how it is related, or interconnected with everything else around it, not by isolating or abstracting it from other influences, which is a primary strategy within the scientific method. (This view is echoed by ecological thinking in life-sciences and by the concept of the relational universe in physics.[3]) From an Indigenous perspective, the spiritual and material world are interconnected, and one cannot be understood without also understanding the other. These are only a few examples to illustrate that it's going to take a lot of engagement and dialogue of a kind for which there is currently very little "space", discursive methodologies or normalized processes supporting trans-disciplinary engagement within modern day post-secondary institutions. Right now, everybody's in their own kitchen cooking their own dinner, so to speak. Unless the normal business as usual process of separate disciplinary work is interrupted and challenged systematically over time, and unless senior leadership of post-secondary institutions actually help to lead this process, calling everyone to a common platform of open dialogue in search of trans-disciplinary understanding, progress on the indigenization of curricula and programs is likely to remain slow.

7. *Capacity Gaps*. The process of guiding and supporting an institution through the complex and challenging process of reconciliation and indigenization requires well educated, experienced and highly skilled leadership and staff who are willing and able to champion the process of institutional learning, growth and change over a period of years. Usually, everyone has their job description, and their narrowly defined scope of responsibilities. But, most of the challenges inherent in the indigenization process lie outside or in between most of the job descriptions in a modern post-secondary institution. This implies that new capacities and new structures will be needed in order to advance the process. It also calls for highly skilled, transdisciplinary change mastery, something that most institutions only learn over time with a lot of help from trusted allies and supporters.
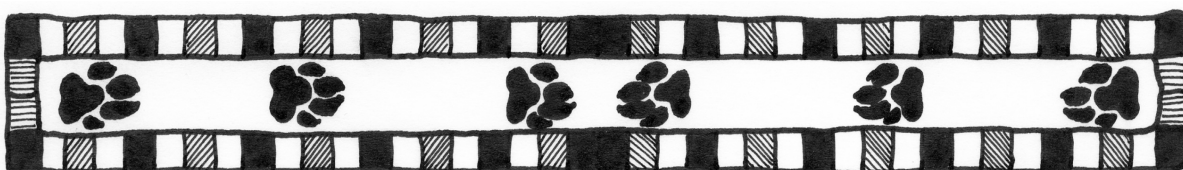
Toward Solutions

We have H.L. Mencken to thank for the insight that "For every complex problem there is an answer that is clear, simple and wrong." By describing some of the barriers that make reconciliation and indigenization within post-secondary institutions difficult, we have tried to show something of the profound depth and complexity of the process that is required in order to achieve real success. Following are a few big ideas for discussion.

1. *Committed and Engaged Leadership*. The first prerequisite for success is that the Board and Senior Leadership of a post-secondary institution working towards reconciliation and indigenization need to understand why this process is necessary, what the general shape of successful outcomes might look like, and are willing to invest their power and influence, as well as their time and money into creating the capacity, the structures and the momentum necessary for change to occur. This is not a process that is likely to succeed without leadership that is committed for the long haul.

2. **Becoming a Learning Organization.** In our experience, the fundamental engine that drives any complex adaptive human systems change processes is learning. The institution and everyone within it needs to assume a humble posture of learning. Training and other immersion learning opportunities connected to indigenization cannot be optional for the faculty and staff of an institution that is serious about reconciliation within the academy. At the same time, learning opportunities need to go far beyond cultural sensitization workshops, to include practical knowledge and skills for addressing the core issues within the academy that are integral to the indigenization process. The task of leadership at every level of the organization is to create and sustain a culture of learning that is inclusive and welcoming to everyone who needs to act in order to bring about the changes that are desired.

3. **Stakeholder Engagement in a Community of Practice.** The stakeholders in this process include Indigenous communities, agencies, leaders, Elders, students and families, as well as key actors from all parts of the institutions day-to-day operations, including faculty, academic leadership, student support staff, administration and student services and senior leadership. *This group needs to be brought together into a kind of community of practice, i.e., a working group committed to learning and continuous improvement of outcomes*. A community of practice is fundamentally a representative group of actors from across the institution who are committed to learning and working together. Each set of stakeholders will need to do their own work in their own department or domain of activity, but all of it will need to fit together into a comprehensive strategy leading to the achievement of clearly articulated goals and outcomes.

   In our experience, the community of practice almost always needs to be facilitated by outside helpers if the goal is (as it is in this case) complex transformational change within the institution itself. This is because everybody engaged in the process is learning. It also carries considerable responsibility for engaging others within their sphere of influence, and so the responsibility for fitting the pieces of the process into a coherent whole, and guiding the journey toward strategic outcomes, usually requires support of a small intercultural team of technical helpers and facilitators who have no interest except to advance the process.

4. **Learning in Action**. In order to learn how to be effective, it's necessary to learn by taking action, then reflecting on what happened as a result of the action taken, then learning how to refine the action that you took to make it even better, and then acting again; baby step by baby step. Of course, mistakes will be made. But, successes will be created as well, and all of it is grist for the mill. But, if you don't move, the horizon remains the same. If you have no experience in the field of action, you really can't learn your way to success. As Paulo Freire and Myles Horton said, "We make the path by walking it".

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