

**“CHANGE EVERYTHING”: A STUDENT-LED PARTICIPATORY ACTION
RESEARCH PROJECT ON DECOLONIZING EDUCATION**

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Abstract: *This paper documents a Participatory Action Research project at Brock University. Our goal was to accelerate progression towards decolonization by holding space for transformative learning experiences that prioritized the wellbeing of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis undergraduate students and that would include others who were committed to learning to be allies. Our purpose was to explore how an experiential education opportunity could create transformative spaces for engaging with decolonization. Data were generated through student reflective journals, notes written while listening to Elders, screen shots of the student only “group chat”, and pieces of art that students had created through the course. Coding and analysis included both conventional approaches to qualitative coding and Indigenous approaches. The student researchers on our team identified six main themes which are paired with recommendations for future pedagogical initiatives. We conclude that radical changes are needed to move towards making universities transformative spaces, which is necessary for decolonization and reconciliation to occur.*

Keywords: *Indigenous students, transformational spaces, positionality, experiential education, decolonizing, Participatory Action Research, qualitative methods, Indigenous research methods*

INTRODUCTION

“We have learned powerful lessons about the assumptions we make and the approaches we accept as ‘this is the way it has to be.’ We have learned that another way is possible.”

– Rynne, Kiara, Tory, Kian, and Kahlan

In university settings across Canada, many initiatives aimed at decolonizing education programmes have arisen. This is in no small way because of the Eurocentric nature of most education systems in Canada, and how traumatic they have been for First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples over centuries (Cote-Meek, 2020). At Brock, our strategic plan mandates a university-wide commitment to “decolonization of the academy through promoting awareness and understanding of Indigenous culture, history and ways of knowing” (Brock University, 2018, p. 14). This priority has been embraced at an institutional level, and efforts are being made across our campus to respond to this strategic priority. While we applaud this strategic plan, we are acutely aware that we continue to operate within the parameters of a Eurocentric education system, one that does not acknowledge Indigenous approaches to knowing and learning (Battiste, 2017).

This paper documents an experiential learning experience that grew into a Participatory Action Research project between Fall 2020 and Fall 2021 at Brock University. The idea for our project arose out of observations from the Indigenous leaders on our team that the (often well-intentioned) decolonization and reconciliation initiatives within our institution are still occurring within the very colonial structures that have been used to oppress Indigenous Peoples in school settings over centuries. They are in fact “colonized” decolonization initiatives. In response, staff and faculty authors for this paper (Cindy Biancaniello, Sandra Wong, Sandy Howe and Valerie Michaelson) proposed the experiential education course that is documented in this paper. Our goal was to accelerate progression towards decolonization and reconciliation in our own context by holding space for transformative learning experiences that would prioritize the wellbeing of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis undergraduate students. As our plan unfolded, supporting and empowering non-Indigenous students who had a genuine commitment to becoming allies became another one of our goals. We were honored to meet with three Elders—Peter Beaucage from Nipissing First Nation, and Ida Martin and Melba Thomas, who are from Six Nations of the Grand River Mohawk Territory—to ground our ideas before we began. We were reminded by these Elders that all our actions and goals begin with the land, and to make all our actions in the spirit of the Wampum agreements (Hill & Coleman, 2019), based on trust, reciprocity, and co-operation

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As we envisioned this course, we made a commitment that to the best of our abilities, our approach would be embodied, relational and holistic. We approached this task with humility, realizing that we have all been so shaped by colonial approaches to education that the necessary decolonizing process would involve decolonizing ourselves as much as it involved decolonization within the university more broadly. Challenging our own assumptions and preconceived ideas as leaders would be central. When the student researchers were recruited to this team, they identified the following research question to guide this research project: How can experiential education opportunities create transformative spaces for learning about and engagement with issues related to colonization, reconciliation and Indigenous health?

While all authors contributed to all aspects of this study, this manuscript focusses on the experiences of the student researchers throughout this project. Thus, their voices are prioritized in this paper. The goal of the students (Tory, RYanne, Kiara, Kahlan and Kian) was to propose wise practices (Manitowabi, 2022) that others could build on to hold pedagogical space for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to work collaboratively, specifically in relation to personally challenging topics such as colonization. The results and discussion sections of this paper are written solely from their perspectives.

Our Context

The context of our work was more than a backdrop to our project. Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) has documented the history and realities of colonization of Indigenous peoples, including the effects of Canada’s Indian Residential School System (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). Consequences of this colonial violence and genocide include persistent inequitable health outcomes experienced for Indigenous people and communities, along with a transgenerational transmission of trauma, high suicide rates, gender-based violence (National Inquiry into Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls, 2019), and inequitable distribution of social factors that determine health status, opportunities, and trajectories (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015a, 2015b, 2015c). Canadian educational systems continue this legacy and for many Indigenous students, university is an experience that is characterized by pain, alienation, and discrimination (Battiste, 2013; Cote-Meek, 2020).

Within this context, our learning journey was influenced heavily by listening to testimonies from Elders, engaging with Indigenous health scholars, and our own group discussions and growing relationships. We were also attentive to the heavy events that were occurring in Canada throughout the timespan of our project. Shortly after our project began in September 2020, Atikamekw woman Joyce Echaquan from Manawan died while being the recipient of racist taunts in a Montreal hospital (Godin, 2020). Two weeks later, Atikamekw man Georges-Hervé Awashish from the Obedjiwan community was in the Chicoutimi hospital receiving treatment for a foot injury and for dialysis. He reported to family members, hospital staff and the media that he heard nurses making racist remarks and that he did not feel safe. Awashish later also died while under hospital care (Rowe, 2020; Savid, 2020). Both incidents highlight the persistent and longstanding problems of racism in Canada's healthcare system. These events were a catalyst for the First Nation, Métis and Inuit members of our team to share their own experiences of racist encounters in the healthcare system.

As we approached the latter phases of our project in April 2021, the remains of 215 Indigenous children in unmarked graves at the former Kamloops Indian Residential School located in Kamloops, British Columbia were uncovered. This was a strong reminder of the colonial policies that continue to shape and harm the lives of First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. Subsequent news reports were reminders of the urgency of the larger task of decolonization and reconciliation initiatives that lead to justice, and to the dismantling of racist systems that continue to oppress Indigenous peoples.

METHODS

Methodological Orientation

Historically, colonial research has been a harmful experience for many Indigenous peoples. Further, methodologies that are rooted in Indigenous ways of knowing have been eroded by colonial silencing and obscured by Western forms of knowledge production (Absolon & Willett, 2004). In response, and as a challenge to Western research paradigms, we selected Participatory Action Research (PAR) as a methodological orientation for our project (Kincheloe, 2009). This approach aligns with Bird-Naytowhow et al. (2017), who write that because PAR methods move research away from harmful colonial research practices, they are an “an effective strategy for knowledge acquisition, mobilization, translation, and exchange within community-engaged research and scholarship” (p. 3). Along with the opportunity to examine their own lives via the research process, PAR facilitates individuals to become “agents of

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change” in their own communities (Akom et al., 2017) and to take deliberate action to enhance their own experiences. Our choice to use PAR was also guided by the belief that people can listen to their own experiences as a way of determining and generating individual and social change (Wallerstein & Duran 2006; Wilson et al., 2008). In this way, participants become researchers about their daily lives. While not without complexity or above critique (Kesby, 2007), participatory methods are also valuable in that problems that are identified are rooted in real life and solutions that are proposed are more likely to be relevant and realistic.

We believe that PAR aligns with Indigenous research principles of ‘nothing about us without us’ because it allows a group of co-researchers to have equal ‘seats at the table’ where they share agency as researchers. Within this paradigm, we had the flexibility to generate data in a way that challenged traditional Western methods. Initially, no members of our team had academic training in Indigenous research methods; however, guided by scholars such as Absolon and Willett (2004), we approached this research task with the guiding view that the Indigenous members of our team were equipped with knowledge and skills to research their own experiences based on their well-established (for some) and emerging (for others) knowledge of their own cultures, ways of knowing, relationships, and lived experiences. We saw this approach as a challenge to Western European ways of establishing and valuing research, and as a challenge to our team to participate in the creation of knowledge in ways that were unfamiliar or less familiar to us. This involved respectful representation of ourselves within our research; revising our methods to be flexible and culturally responsive to independent needs; and for the Indigenous members of our team, trusting in their traditions and cultural identities, to guide the process of creating knowledge, and having “courage, tenacity and faith” (Absolon & Willett, 2004, p. 15).

As we progressed through the project, we began to understand that using a Participatory Action Research method that is nested in decolonial research approaches (Kovach, 2010; Smith, 2008) is a hallmark of a phenomenon that is occurring widely in Indigenous-centered and informed research. For example, Kovach (2021) has discussed how Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars can navigate research with Indigenous people and epistemologies, even while stressing concerns about the lack of tools for Indigenous researchers in academic contexts. Kovach cites Māori scholar and educator Graham Hingangaroa Smith, who explains:

...when we looked to the existing theoretical and methodological tools hanging on the wall of the university to help us understand and to deal with these Māori-specific issues, we would sometimes discover that the

available tools sometimes did not completely fit the circumstances that we were dealing with (p. 193)

The above quote reflects our own experience in conducting this project. This reinforced our understanding of the barriers Indigenous scholars may encounter, including the reality that the standard tools in the academy include theories and methodologies that are derived from Eurocentric research traditions and often work to invalidate Indigenous theories and methodologies (Simpson, 2017). As we were able and aware, we were intentional about “decentering” Western approaches to make space for Indigenous approaches. Being attentive to both voice and representation was also core to our approach (Kovach, 2010).

Class Format

Our project was intended to provide an in-person experiential and land-based learning experience. When COVID-19 public health measures necessitated our 2020/2021 academic year be delivered virtually, we moved our project online. The irony that a land-based learning initiative was taking place virtually was something our group discussed at length. While initially disappointed with the virtual format, we were all surprised at the depth of relationship that could develop through this online platform, and at the support we were able to offer to each other throughout our project. We began weekly class meetings with an intentional check in that allowed space and time for us to build trusting and authentic relationships. We were intentional about the redistribution of power in our group, including resetting power differentials. From the beginning, using first names rather than titles such as Professor was important in our group. A central component of our course was to facilitate each student in developing a relationship with an Elder. For the Indigenous students, an Elder who aligned with the Indigenous nation of the student was invited to partner with them. In keeping with the core principle of reciprocity, we honored the time the Elders shared with us with both traditional and monetary gifts. This project became a welcome haven of community during a year that felt isolated for many university students.

Our class becomes a research project

Initially a twelve-week course, the students reported such powerful experiences of learning, transformation, and community-building that they requested to continue the work. In response and working alongside Elders and our established cultural support and research team, we co-designed a student-led research project that enabled us to engage reflexively on our own experiences over a year.

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Recruitment

The course was housed in the Department of Health Sciences and therefore a focus on First Nations, Métis, and Inuit health was a natural starting place for our learning. Students were initially recruited through the Hadiya’dagénhahs First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Student Centre student list. Cindy Biancaniello sent an invitation to all self-identified students at Brock University, and three undergraduate students (primary authors Kiara Kalenuik, Ryanne Logan and Tory Shklanka) responded. Two non-Indigenous students learned about this class and, out of their intentions to learn to be strong allies, requested to join (primary authors Kian Rego and Kahlan Woodhouse).

Positionality

Intentional reflection on our own individual and group positions in relation to Indigeneity, colonization, privilege, and education has been fundamental to our project. Through iterative attention to our own group identities and social positions, which we called our positionality statements, we became more deeply aware that who we are is not stagnant: that we are ever evolving and growing through the accumulation of knowledge, life experiences, and relationships. We reflected on our positions and social identities in relation to who we were at the start of the project, and throughout our learning journey we also reflected regularly on who we were becoming, both as individuals and as a group (Hurley & Jackson, 2020).

Our full research team comprised Brock University students, staff (present and former), and faculty. We recognized early on that understanding who we are in relationship to colonization broadly and to one another specifically was foundational to our learning experience. Who we are is inseparable from our project, and our life experiences and different social positions shaped the way that we approached our research. Ryanne is a First Nations Lenape woman from Eelünaapéewi Lahkéewiit (Delaware Nation) and she is a part of the Turtle clan. Tory is part Inuk and Mi’kmaq. Kiara self identifies as a Métis student who has lost history and has been working hard to share the knowledge she has gained from her experiences with her family who struggle with identity. Cindy is Inuk. Sandra is a Hodinohsyo:ni woman from Six Nations of the Grand River and belongs to the Onondaga Wolf Clan. Kian and Kahlan are non-Indigenous individuals who are from multiracial and racialised settler backgrounds, respectively. Sandy, Madelyn, and Valerie are all White settler scholars. All the non-Indigenous participants are committed to “staying unsettled” as they work towards becoming allies.

Project Data

Data were generated throughout our course. We created a web-based course repository to house all data and had group discussions to decide what would “count” as data. Our final data set included a variety of student assignments (written and creative artwork), reflective journals, positionality statements, notes written while listening to Elders and Indigenous guest speakers, screenshots of the student only “group chat”, and art pieces that students had created through the course.

Coding and Analysis

As we approached coding and analysis of our data, we were inspired by an approach described by Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2008), who writes:

Indigenous methodologies are often a mix of existing methodological approaches and indigenous practice. The mix reflects the training of indigenous researchers which continues to be within the academy, and the parameters and common-sense understandings of research which govern how indigenous communities and researchers define their activities. (p. 143)

In keeping with Smith’s guidance, we stayed open to this “mix” of existing methodological approaches. This included conventional approaches to qualitative coding (i.e., Creswell & Poth, 2016; Saldaña, 2021) and also to Indigenous approaches (Absolon & Willett, 2004; Smith, 2008). Initially, Valerie trained the students to use thematic and descriptive coding as might be taught in an introductory qualitative methods course in a Western health sciences programme. While a useful starting point, we all felt dis-ease with that being our only approach to engaging with our project data. Sandra encouraged the students to “code with their hearts and intuitions” along with their minds. She explained that from her perspective, it made most sense to code our data based on the four components of the Medicine Wheel. She taught the group about the Medicine Wheel as a cyclical set of teachings that reflect Indigenous belief systems and philosophies, including the mental, spiritual, physical, and emotional aspects of a whole human being as well as the four phases of life and the four directions (North, South, West, and East). Cindy explained that the way that made most sense for her as an Inuk was to organize the data using the Inuksuk as a guide. From her perspective, the Inuksuk symbolizes a process that cannot be completed without the support of a group. We agreed to use the approach to coding that connected most with each of us personally and academically. Again, we challenged

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ourselves to decenter Western approaches and be open to relational, holistic approaches to understanding our data in a way that centered Indigenous knowledges and experiences.

We met weekly to ask critical and reflective questions of each other and of the process. Our weekly check in was followed by critical conversation about what insights were emerging through the “conversational method” to data analysis that we had embraced (Kovach, 2010). These critical yet deeply relational dialogues align with, and acknowledge, the power of traditional Indigenous knowledge sharing that happens orally (Buttina, 2015).

We all agreed that the most compelling aspect of our work was our process. Not only did our learning continue throughout the analysis, but our understanding of what we had learned deepened as we reflected together on the learning journey. We resisted the temptation to develop themes on which we all universally agreed and decided that in order to be true to our learning, two distinct ways of presenting our findings were essential – Indigenous and Western. The students decided it would be beneficial to work in two distinct subgroups, one to reflect a Traditional/Indigenous interpretation and the other to reflect a Western interpretation of the findings. Because our group had developed such meaningful and trusting relationships, and the non-Indigenous students had gravitated towards more Indigenous approaches to coding than the Western approaches that they had initially learned, a critically reflective conversation was initiated by all the students. Collectively, they raised questions as to whether it should only be the Indigenous students who would use the Indigenous methods, and these questions did not yield simple answers. These questions were further complicated by the depth of trust and mutual care that had grown between all the students. Ultimately, the students decided together that the Indigenous student researchers would finalize the Indigenous model and the non-Indigenous student researchers would finalize the Western depiction of our findings. We acknowledged that while we had become a strong and cohesive team, it did not erase the privilege and power of our positionalities. The overarching principle ‘Nothing about us without us,’ which prioritizes Indigenous peoples speaking about and for Indigenous peoples, was still our guide.

To the best of our knowledge and abilities, we grounded our project in the First Nations Research Principles of OCAP (Ownership, Control, Access, and Possession) (First Nations Information Governance Centre, 2023) and on an adapted form of what Kirkness and Barnhardt (2016) have described as the Four Rs of Indigenous Research: 1. Respect (having compassion for others and ourselves); 2. Relationship (building, maintaining and honoring relationships over time); 3. Reciprocity (giving back to others with gratitude), and 4. Responsibility (taking responsibility for our actions). We note that while Kirkness

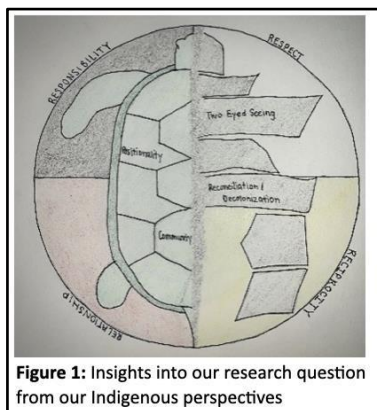
and Barnhardt originally proposed “relevance” as part of their framework, guided by the Indigenous leaders on our team, we instead embraced the term “relationship” to ground our study. At different points during the study when we had research decisions to make, we would revisit these principles to gain clarity about our next steps. We were grateful to have the opportunity to engage meaningfully with Elders throughout this project. We received ethical clearance from the Brock University Health Sciences Research Ethics Board and the Brock University Indigenous Research Ethics Board, Aboriginal Research Advisory Circle, in spring, 2021 (Ethics certificate 20-008 – MICHAELSON).

RESULTS

Our research was guided by the question: How can experiential education opportunity create transformative spaces for learning about and engagement with issues related to colonization, reconciliation, and Indigenous health? As we engaged with our project data, the commonality and the differences in our Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches stood out to us. From their Indigenous lens, Kiara and Ryanne chose an artistic integration of a Turtle, an Inuksuk, and a Medicine Wheel to depict their data whereas Kahlan and Kian chose an adaptation of a Venn diagram. Both approaches offer insights into the same broad experience. The visual artistry of the Inuksuk and Turtle is in keeping with Indigenous ways of knowing through oral traditions of storytelling, where written words are not prioritized to communicate knowledge. Its visual representation of symbols will resonate with some learning styles and people as an image is on display for people to take from it when they need (meaning, personal connection, etc.) and there is not a need to give a great amount of detail. The Western model speaks clearly to the themes that are presented with less room for misinterpretation. The “web of connections” that is depicted visually may be easier for a “Western brain” to understand how everything is connected, which may not be as obvious to non-Indigenous peoples. Kian and Kahlan shared that they were drawn to the ways of understanding the data that Kiara and Ryanne were using, but as they reflected, they did not want to appropriate or be disrespectful by engaging in similar ways. Since they were unsure, they decided to present their findings in a way that was more in keeping with what they had learned about qualitative data representation from a Western lens.

Figure 1 presents the findings from the Indigenous perspectives of Ryanne and Kiara and Figure 2 presents the findings from the non-Indigenous perspective of Kian and Kahlan.

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1. Indigenous Insights

We (Ryanne, First Nations and Kiara, Métis) began our task of creating the summary Indigenous model by first reflecting on what each team member had presented individually about how experiential education initiatives can create transformative spaces for learning about and engagement with issues related to colonization, reconciliation, and Indigenous health. We also wanted to integrate the common themes that we had discussed as a full group throughout our analysis, and the experiences and

ideas that had resonated with us personally. This led to the creation of our model, which features a Turtle combined with an Inuksuk. The Turtle refers to the land we are on, which many First Nations and Métis peoples know as Turtle Island. The Turtle also holds personal treasure to Ryanne, being a part of the Turtle Clan. The Turtle is juxtaposed with the Inuksuk, which is what Cindy (Inuk) shared to represent the importance of each stone in the Inuksuk and how each piece is significant. No one piece of the Inuksuk is more important than the other, and the loss of a stone jeopardizes the structural integrity, similar to the relationships in our group. This model represents the harmony that comes in this group environment and emphasizes strength in unity, which was core to our pedagogical experience. The reason we were able to come to a place of harmony while we were engaging with such a complex and difficult topic was because of the priority of the four words or phrases located in the middle of our image.

The words positionality and community are embedded on the Turtle’s back. Positionality emerged as a guiding principle throughout our research. We realized that our growing and respectful awareness of our own positions in relation to decolonization and reconciliation was not only core to our learning but that the discussions we had could not be separated from our individual and group-awareness. In turn, this self and group awareness was the foundation of our community, and so was central to our work. Our data were clear that a collective experience was that this journey would not have been possible without working together in community. For us as Indigenous scholars, being in this space provided an opportunity to reclaim our ancestral roots within a university context: something we had not been encouraged to do before this project.

The phrases “Two-Eyed Seeing” and “decolonization and reconciliation” are on two stones of the Inuksuk. Early in the course, an Indigenous scholar (Margo Greenwood) taught our group about Two-Eyed Seeing (Greenwood et al., 2017; Marshall, Marshall, & Bartlett, 2015). She taught us to use this concept to understand where each one of us was

coming from with their perspectives on a topic. This way of thinking proved important to our work, and we used it throughout our project to remind ourselves that there is more than one way to approach a topic. Recognizing diverse ways of viewing things allowed us to talk about difficult topics and view our different ways of seeing and understanding as a strength. This was especially important when we engaged with the challenging topics of decolonization and reconciliation. While our experiences in this project were very positive, we still all exist within structures and systems that are oppressive to Indigenous peoples. Because of our different positions, some of us have benefited from government policies that have harmed others, and that is why interrogating the topic of decolonization, even when it was uncomfortable, was essential to the integrity of our course. Both the honest acknowledgment about the harms of colonialism held together with the hope that reconciliation is possible, created the safer, challenging, honest and hopeful space that made our learning possible.

Our model sits within a traditional Medicine Wheel because our experience of transformation that happened during this course was because the learning was approached as holistic and relational. This was an intuitive way to present our findings because it signifies the connectedness of everything, and how we must ground ourselves and find balance, taking into consideration our wholeness of mind, body, spirit, and emotion. In our model, the Four Rs of Respect, Responsibility, Reciprocity and Relationships surround the Medicine Wheel, and are the outer frame of our work that guided us and held us together. The holistic and relational structure of the Medicine Wheel and the Four Rs were foundational to creating a transformative space for our learning to occur.

2. Non-Indigenous Insights

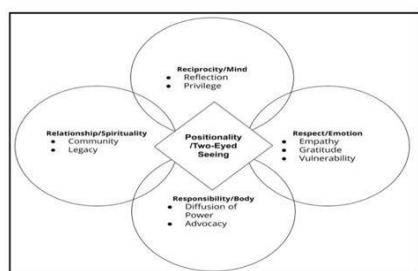


Figure 2: Insights into our research question from our non-Indigenous perspectives

We (non-Indigenous students, Kian and Kahlan) created this model to depict our analysis of our group research study about how experiential education initiatives can create transformative spaces for learning about colonization, reconciliation, and Indigenous health. Our model has four quadrants, which overlap to represent their interconnectedness. For us, the most prominent themes that were identified from the data and our large group conversations were categorized into the Four Rs (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 2016). We paired these guiding principles with mind, body, spirit, and emotion. For each quadrant, main themes that were present in the data were chosen that also spoke strongly to the research question about how the transformation of our positionality

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contributed to the creation of our culturally safe space. The themes were chosen based on commonalities that were found during the coding process of our research. “Two-Eyed Seeing” and “positionality” are at the center of the model, both words touching each of the quadrants. These were the two most central themes to our entire project, as understanding both Two-Eyed Seeing and positionality were the foundations for the most important insights that we gained from this research.

Our data that informed this theme began with the positionality statements that each of us wrote at the beginning of our course. None of us were confident doing this at the beginning. We were surprised to see our positionality statements grow and change throughout the course. As we reflected on this through our coding and analysis, we realised that positionality is not a finite destination, but an ever-changing position that grows with increased knowledge and experience. Another realization we made as we analysed our data and discussed positionality was that we grew not only as individuals, but as a group. Reflecting on individual, and then group positionality was transformative. Some of the most important learning started to happen when we realized how much the others in the group were changing and growing. Two-Eyed Seeing invites us to be open to different ways of knowing (Marshall, Marshall, & Bartlett, 2015). This was also important in our findings because it kept us honest about the legitimate tensions between living in two worlds. We tried to make sense of how Indigenous and Western lenses can work together, and if or when they even should work together. We did not have simple answers to these questions but exploring the questions themselves was fundamental to our learning.

Our model features the “Four Rs” of Respect, Reciprocity, Responsibility, and Relationship. We wanted to honor how the Medicine Wheel gave us deeper insight into our whole selves – body, mind, spirit, and emotion. This was central to the holistic nature of our learning journey, and our intention was to respectfully engage, as non-Indigenous people, with a valued symbol and teaching tool that had been taught to us by an Anishinabek Elder. Yet, as non-Indigenous people, we did not want to culturally appropriate this symbol. After much critical discussion and personal reflection, we decided to use four words – body, mind, spirit, and emotion – alongside the Four Rs but without using the Medicine Wheel. This was communicated as our project evolved and we found the Four Rs to be relatable to everyone in the group, while the Medicine Wheel only familiar to some. Community and legacy were a part of the Relationship/Spirituality oval in our model. This is because we learned how important relationships, including the legacy of our ancestors, are to Indigenous peoples, and how being part of a strong community supported our learning. All of this was learned, discussed and communicated during our weekly team meetings.

Reflection and privilege are centered in the oval that we have labelled Reciprocity/Mind. We increasingly understood that the outer work required to dismantle these systems must be rooted in the inner work of reflecting on and acknowledging our own experiences of power and privilege. Empathy, gratitude, and vulnerability are centered in the oval entitled Respect/Emotion because we wanted to provide some examples of the range of emotions we all experienced through this course, as well as the encouragement and safety experienced to show up as our true selves at all times. Finally, we placed the words diffusion of power and advocacy within the oval called Responsibility/Body. Reflection on these words gave us insight into how we want our life-long commitment to be allies to be characterized. This involves attention to our own growing realization that we are all embedded within systems of power that are socially constructed. We want to use whatever power we have (current and future) to work from our own positions in a way that honors our relationships to First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples and to the land itself in ways that are honest, authentic and accountable.

Collective reflections and recommendations

As the five students on the project, we (Kiara, RYanne, Tory, Kahlan and Kian) found considering both models together to be unexpectedly productive. We identified six main themes that were central to our experiences in holding space for decolonization through experiential learning. Each of these themes is paired with a recommendation for future pedagogical initiatives.

1) *Positionality*

The complexity of positionality leapt from our findings. Our reflections on positionality held space for the Indigenous students to be attentive to the mixed White/Indigenous heritage that they each held. One of these students said, “I have always been confused with my identity ... and I never felt like I belonged.” Another said, “I am struggling right now under the pressure of being both an Indigenous person and a non-Indigenous person. My spirit is being torn between two worlds, and I am feeling pressured to achieve great things as an Indigenous woman in a world created to put me down as that.” Another student said,

I am privileged to have the benefit of being from both colonizer and colonisee [sic] backgrounds, however, it is an internal struggle that I also

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face. No matter what, I am privileged for the position that I am in and for the life that I have been able to live.

We realized that positionality meant something different to everyone in the group and we resisted temptations to erase individual experiences by coming to consensus about what positionality means. Throughout the data, we saw that we often discussed positionality in relation to gender and racial/cultural power and in relation to being students, staff members, and professors. All of these things shaped our experiences of power and marginalization. Our discussions around positionality led to important discussions around emotions of things like strength, shame, resistance, confidence, confusion, privilege, and inspiration. One of the non-Indigenous students said, “Getting comfortable with being uncomfortable – this is a key takeaway from this course. As a non-Indigenous student who grew up comfortably in middle class, it is important for me to recognize that how I got to where I am is a product of all of my privilege.” The non-Indigenous members of our group became more deeply aware that the term “ally” is not one to be used lightly, and nor is it something one can self-declare or claim. It is instead an ongoing practice that is rooted in responsibility, accountability, solidarity, and action. All the non-Indigenous members of the group noticed that a shift in their language was happening throughout the course; they no longer self-identified as “allies” but as “aspiring allies” out of recognition that becoming an ally is a sustained journey over one’s life. If Indigenous peoples receive them as an ally, it is an honour to be earned and not something that is self-declared.

Recommendation 1. While these discussions about positionality were not comfortable, the strength of our relationships was what held us together through the discomfort. We recommend that groups who may want to create a similar pedagogical experience be very intentional about centering discussions of positionality within authentic and intentional relationships.

2) Acknowledging Privilege

Acknowledging privilege was a central part of our learning journey, and awareness of the intersections of our individual and collective journey was essential to any transformation that happened. We also recognized that as Indigenous peoples, racialized minorities, and White people, our paths to engagement with the project were distinct. Our sense of community shaped our journey, and for our group, having Indigenous and non-Indigenous people collaborating was powerful. Initially, we expected to understand ourselves better through participation in this course and later, research project. One unexpected finding was how much we grew as a group, and how important that was to

our learning. This allowed us to be open to learning hard things, and to connect our minds and hearts, learning not only individually but together.

Recommendation 2. As future researchers embarking on similar projects, one of our recommendations is to be attentive to doing both inner and outer work together, not only as individuals but also as a group. Acknowledging privilege requires a “reorientation from the dominant way of thinking” (Nixon, 2018, p.7) that includes a commitment to understanding each of our roles in sustaining oppressive systems and intentionally listening to, learning from, and following the leadership of Indigenous people in moving forward with decolonization and reconciliation. Because of this, the phrase “nothing about us without us” became the guiding phrase of our project.

3) The Way of our Learning Journey

The way of our learning journey was as important as what we learned. Another key insight we gained is that the way we took the journey together was as important as what we learned. We noticed that in both models, there was much more representation of how we approached the course rather than the actual content. At the beginning of our course, the official curriculum was to learn about Indigenous health scholarship, including the severity of the ways that colonization has impacted Indigenous health and the strengths of Indigenous Traditional Knowledge systems as a resource for the health of First Nations, Métis and Inuit peoples. We would now say that the Four Rs were the unofficial curriculum of our entire course. They were not ever intentionally part of our learning goals, but they guided us at every step and so were foundational to our learning. We found that within this framework of the Four Rs, it was even safe to make mistakes. Because of the deep respect we had for each other and the strength of the relationships, when we did make mistakes, rather than becoming defensive, we were able to see them as opportunities for all of us to reflect and to grow.

Recommendation 3. The Four Rs have frequently been used as a framework for Indigenous research and we believe that they also have a fundamental place in teaching and learning. We recommend this framework be used by future groups who undertake a similar learning experience.

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4) Two-Eyed Seeing

Two-Eyed Seeing is also featured in both of our models. This was a concept that was presented to us early in the course from the different Elders and Knowledge Keepers who spoke with us, and that resonated from our course readings (Greenwood et al., 2017; Iwama et al., 2009; Reid, 2020). What we learned is that stepping into a Two-Eyed mindset as a way of being together was fundamental in creating a space not that is 50/50, but rather holds space for both Indigenous and Western ways of knowing and being. As one of the Indigenous members of our group said, “we have normalized western ways as the way of doing things, so we need to be especially attentive to Indigenous ways, especially with our young people, so that they become more confident.” Another of the Indigenous students reflected on this, saying she had sometimes felt uncomfortable submitting artwork in her university work. However, after taking this course, she was able to re-evaluate and feel confident saying, “No, this is an Indigenous way of knowing. It is valuable and it means just as much.”

Two-Eyed Seeing also invites us to be open to different ways of knowing and this helped us to navigate some of the tensions between living in two worlds that we encountered in our course. While we do not claim that we have come to a tidy resolution, we had deep conversations trying to understand and make sense of how Indigenous and Western lenses can harmonize, and if there are times when it is appropriate to ask if they even should work together. This kind of decision-making process is reflective of what was at the core of our learning journey: knowing who we are and engaging responsibly and respectfully from that position, for the benefit of our community. Considering these complexities and tensions in a meaningful way is an important part of the lifelong journey we are all on.

Recommendation 4. We recommend that as other groups take on similar projects, they adopt approaches that honor multiple ways of knowing. We found that beyond talking about them, letting them guide us in how we approach the learning experience overall disrupted Eurocentric dominant approaches and helped us move beyond the status quo. As Kuokkanen (2011) maintains, Indigenous university students are often expected to leave behind their own cultural frameworks and epistemologies and adapt to Western ways of knowing, assessment, and learning. For our group, we were invited to lean into Indigenous ways of knowing, and to push boundaries of what an acceptable assignment would look like, how assessment would happen, and how we would learn together. The freedom to “redraw the boundaries of knowledge” (Kuokkanen, 2011, p. 164) was initially scary. By the end, the realization that we did not have to be bound by Western paradigms for deep learning to occur was liberating for all of us. In fact, forcing

Indigenous knowledges into pre-existing Western frameworks is simply another form of “settler appropriation” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 3).

5) The Flexibility and Holistic Qualities of our Approach

Our learning journey was holistic, responsive, and flexible. One of the unique features of our course was the power of what we started unofficially calling our “living textbook.” This approach was authentic to our class and honored each person in our group and the context around us. In this way, it enabled us to be attentive to the world around us and to our own lives throughout the course. Our living textbook included academic scholarship, but it also included the wisdom and stories that we heard from the Elders, our own group conversations, and the events in our own lives. For us, decolonization of our learning involved permission to move beyond the mental and intellectual learning that most of us had been trained to prioritize, and include our hearts, our spirits, and our relationships as central to our learning journey.

We had a rolling syllabus of all that was unfolding around us. In fact, we constantly evolved our syllabus to match our lives and experiences. This responsive flexibility (Vreuls et al., 2022) was essential to our learning. Our attentiveness to the news throughout our course gave us yet another living textbook with which to engage with the urgency of the issues we were discussing. We took advantage of the teaching opportunities as they presented themselves on the current issues of the day and in our lives. We allowed conversation to come out of our own experiences. As we read about Indigenous education, we considered how through Western approaches, education systems develop best practices by maintaining, repeating, and improving on successful models (Little Bear, 2000; McDermott, 2021).

Yet many Indigenous knowledge systems take a more cyclical approach. While we do not attempt to resolve or to reconcile these two approaches, we draw attention to the importance of the “living curriculum” (Bath et al., 2004) that guided our course. This gave the students control over the curriculum. We could raise, write about, and respond to any issues that we encountered in our lives; and conversely, if there was a topic that we did not want to explore, we did not need to provide an explanation, and not talking about it was respected. This was especially important for the Indigenous students, who experience colonial violence daily. Having control and agency over the curriculum allowed us to make wise choices about engaging with challenging and painful topics in ways that did not cause us harm. What that looked like was different for each student, and that was also honored.

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Recommendation 5. It was by allowing our course to be messy, and to immerse ourselves in a non-linear journey that we knew would not be finished, that the transformative learning was supported. This took courage as it ran counter to familiar Western approaches that to date were the only experiences any of us had ever had in school settings. We encourage future groups to take this to heart and to trust the process. Remaining flexible and empowering the Indigenous students to stay in control of the curriculum is a high priority. Because of this, our course could not be repeated because it followed our lives, our own journeys, and our increasing awareness of the historic realities of colonization all around us in present situations. Our recommendation is that future courses “trust the process” rather than try to prescribe where the learning will go in advance.

6) The Interdependence of all Parts of our Project

So far, we have written about these themes as if they are distinct, but in reality, they are interconnected. Each theme was informed, challenged, and deepened by the other themes, and like the interdependence of the stones in the Inuksuk (Figure 1) and the overlapping lines of the Venn diagram (Figure 2), every piece of our learning journey was dependent on all of the other pieces. Two-Eyed Seeing would not be possible without the safe space created through the Four Rs framework. Authenticity would not be possible without understanding our own positionality. It would not have been possible to visit our positions so deeply without the respectful environment that was fostered. And we could not have had the respect without the authenticity. It was only by using the Four Rs that we could create a space that this living textbook was safer. We write “safer” rather than safe because we learned that safety looked different for each of us, and that it was not possible to ever guarantee complete safety because the work was too hard and raw. Caring for and being attentive to each other throughout the project was essential. Otherwise, it would have been too vulnerable. Our project was holistic, integrated, and each piece mutually interdependent.

Recommendation 6. As spaces are created for learning about decolonization and reconciliation, all these dimensions that we have named in this paper are critical: awareness of our own positionalities and ensuring that there is room for personal and group growth; a respectful framework for the learning journey that prioritises healthy and authentic relationships; and a curriculum that is living, responsive, and that is attentive to the complexity of the world around us and to our own lives. This includes making room for our struggles as much as for our successes. Each piece is essential to the whole.

Self-care

We have been transformed by this research. It has better prepared us to be able to engage in decolonization, reconciliation, and justice initiatives in the health sciences and beyond. Yet, we also were opened in ways that we did not expect, and we engaged with heavy content and real-time events throughout our project. We recognized the need for self-care and group-care throughout. Care does not mean we make hard things easy. The Four Rs gave us a framework for caring for ourselves and each other.

Staff and Faculty Reflection

As faculty and staff who initiated this course, we were very conscious that we asked the students to open their eyes, hearts, and souls for this work. A core part of our pedagogical strategy was to use our class discussions to help students target moments of anger, confusion, feeling responsible, guilt and embarrassment because of not knowing or feeling angry at the system for not teaching about these topics. We were intentional that while we would not shy away from challenging and painful topics, we were not going to open up wounds that we would remain open without support and care. Cindy and Sandra met regularly with all students outside course time for cultural and other support. For some of the Indigenous students, the course was a more acute look at the trauma that Indigenous people are going through than they had yet experienced. We were all offered Elder support throughout the course. The non-Indigenous students also found these supports invaluable as they grappled with their own embeddedness in the oppressive systems but were encouraged by Sandra and Cindy to resist feelings of guilt and instead focus on moving forward into a shared future. The students had their own group chat, which they considered one of the strongest and most nurturing supports throughout the project.

Concluding Thoughts

Our full team recognizes that having the resources, opportunity, and institutional and Tri-council support to participate in this course was unique, and we are grateful to have had this experience. It was a first-of-its-kind, though hopefully not the last, experiential, heavily student-led course in the Department of Health Sciences at Brock University. We want to share what we learned in hopes that it will be part of a larger conversation as others—Indigenous and non-Indigenous, students, staff, and faculty—push boundaries and expand approaches to teaching and learning related to decolonization that do not simply reinforce colonial approaches in colonized institutions. We speak only as

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ourselves, and from our own experiences, and we are not experts in Indigenous or any other pedagogies. We also do not prescribe what we did as a formula for other groups, though we hope that some of the principles of what we learned will support others who are looking for new ways forward.

Through our work together as learners in a university context, we have learned powerful lessons about the assumptions we make and the approaches we accept as “this is the way it has to be.” We have learned that another way is possible. We resonate with Kuokkanen’s (2011) call for moving beyond Indigenous voices and spaces (which are essential) to a “fundamental transformation of values with a measure of creativity, and ... a radical break with past practices” (p. 163).

Because we have de-identified ourselves in this paper, we have chosen not to share the more personal painful, frustrating, and disappointing elements of our learning journey. We would like to respectfully honor and acknowledge them here without sharing personal details. We write this for other students who would choose to engage in a course such as we have described. As one of our Indigenous students said, “Decolonization and reconciliation is not just a big hug. It is being honest about the impact of colonization and leads us forward to sustained and costly justice. It’s about understanding our part in sustaining these systems.” The tension that some of us have benefited from policies that oppress others was visceral and tangible throughout our course. To move forward together we did not need a “big warm fuzzy”: we had to understand truth, and the extent of the work still to be done.

Our experience as a team of First Nations, Inuit and Métis students and staff and non-Indigenous students, staff, and faculty members reminds us of the tenacious and sustaining power of such alliances. We each agree that we all have a role to play in moving decolonization, reconciliation, and justice forward on university campuses. We are intentional in not proposing a tidy ending to our project, and acknowledge that our work together, and our learning journey about decolonizing in the university context, is unfinished. As De Leeuw et al. (2013) remind us, unsettling settler colonialism is work that can never be finished. We do not offer our work as a template for others to follow, and nor do we propose that this process on its own could make academic institutions safe spaces for Indigenous peoples and knowledges. We simply contend that this process became a safe and transformative place for us: one that both expanded and blurred the boundaries of teaching and learning for all of us.

Our project was about far more than learning Indigenous content. It was about creating a transformative space of belonging and about redistributing traditional academic power

within our team. It is our hope that this research project, while unfinished and even tentative, helps to move forward the wave of decolonization initiatives that are occurring in university settings across Canada, and to hold spaces of transformation that are rooted in respect, responsibility, reciprocity, and relationship for all who are involved.

We end by acknowledging that while holding space for the kind of experiential learning that we have described in this study has been transformative for all of us, our research still took place within a colonial institution that for the most part continues to be complicit in Canada's oppressive colonial agenda. Our commitment to do everything in our abilities to act as agents of change rather than upholders of the status quo has been reinforced in powerful ways. As we end this project, we are left with many unanswered questions. Yet, in this we are united and clear: we are not calling for minor modifications or additions to the curriculum but for a pedagogical and cultural transformation around what we learn and how we learn it. Radical changes are needed in order to move towards making universities transformative spaces for decolonization and reconciliation to occur. The six recommendations that we have made in this manuscript are early ideas in the structural, relational, and pedagogical changes that we are calling for. We are honoured to make this small contribution to this much larger discussion.

We would like to acknowledge the Elders and Indigenous scholars who went on this journey with us. Without their sustained, knowledgeable, and caring engagement, this course would not have been possible.

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