

# PATHFINDERS: REALIZING RECONCILIATION THROUGH LESSONS LEARNED

Yvonne Poitras Pratt, Patricia Danyluk\*, Sarah Beech, Sarah Charlebois, Clancy Evans, Alyssa Fehr, Amanda Nielsen, and Angela Sanregret

University of Calgary

*In 2016, a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars came together to imagine a better world through a bold approach to education at the Werklund School of Education. This imagining took the form of a newly designed graduate pathway program which focused on meaningfully and actively responding to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) (2015) 94 Calls to Action. Central to the design of our program is the inclusion of a capstone service-learning project that asks graduate students to bring together Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups in designing and delivering projects of mutual benefit. In sharing reflections from their respective learning journeys, our students reveal the complexities and challenges of reconciliatory work but also its many rewards. Further, in sharing these courageous acts and thinking about the lessons learned through our own role as post-secondary educators, we hope to inspire others to take action.*

In 2016, a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars came together to imagine a better world through a bold approach to education at the Werklund School of Education. This imagining took the form of a newly designed graduate pathway program which focused on meaningfully and actively responding to Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission's (TRC) (2015) 94 Calls to Action. As a collaboratively designed effort between a group of trusted Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars (all of whom hold extensive experience in Indigenous education), our graduate pathway program is steeped in the theoretical traditions of Indigenous scholars, allied scholars, aesthetic understandings, and decolonizing ways; in this way, each carefully selected piece of literature is meant to support, critique, and inspire the purposeful enactment of critical service-learning projects by the graduate students. In designing this praxis-based offering, we anticipated that the program would attract a variety of learners - those with, and those without, a deeper understanding of Canada's colonial history. Knowing this, our choice of readings represented a wide and diverse swath of foundational readings, along with a smattering of more sophisticated dives into the intricacies and complexities of reconciliatory work. Having both Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators contribute to the choice of readings was essential as the discussion became more balanced through our dialogue on what was essential to the understanding of reconciliation from both perspectives. To this end, Paulette Regan's (2010) *Unsettling the settler within: Indian residential schools, truth-telling, and reconciliation in Canada* was seen as an essential ally reading, as was Robinson and Martin's (2016) *Arts of engagement: Taking aesthetic action in and beyond Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission* which conveyed Indigenous understandings. Our collective of four

\*Corresponding author - [patricia.danyluk@ucalgary.ca](mailto:patricia.danyluk@ucalgary.ca)

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educators also brought forward their own preferred pedagogical practices based on their particular teaching and learning experiences in the classroom. In bringing forward the strengths of each educator, whether around the power of arts to ignite transformative learning, or the need for praxis-based learning opportunities to move learners beyond theoretical musings to the realm of action, each educator was invited to share, debate, and consider how these separate practices could come together to support each individual student's overall learning experience. Our collective aim was to ignite transformative learning; yet we also considered our design team an embodiment of reconciliation and how future students might react to particular positionings.

The term reconciliatory pedagogy is found in other parts of the world, such as South Africa and Australia, where colonization has had a deleterious impact on Indigenous peoples (Ferreira & Janks, 2007; Nussey, 2014; Wyeld, 2016). Writing from a South African perspective, Ferreira and Janks (2007) describe "reconciliation [as] both over and ... not yet begun" (p. 72). This is the greatest risk of reconciliation; the notion that reconciliation is merely a passing trend undeserving of action or even attention. As our students set out on this unexplored pathway of reconciliation, we equipped them with decolonizing strategies grounded in the knowledge traditions of First Peoples and allies (Battiste, 2013), yet we also recognize our students came equipped with the requisite attributes of courage, daring, and humility as they opted to take on this challenge. As post-secondary educators who are deeply committed to community engagement and the work of reconciliation, we are further convinced that sharing our insights with like-minded educators generates a host of synergistic outcomes - both expected and unexpected.

As a graduate pathway program, the "Indigenous Education: A Call to Action" program is one of three steps within the Master of Education (MEd) Interdisciplinary route at the Werklund School of Education. This program is a direct response to the TRC Call to Action #62 which asks educators, educational leaders, policy-makers, and other concerned citizens, to embark on the work of reconciling relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people through their professional roles. Central to our response is the inclusion of a capstone service-learning project that asks students to bring together Indigenous and non-Indigenous groups to support projects of mutual benefit. Our blended program consists of two concurrent summer courses, followed by two online courses: one in the fall, and another in the winter. Through each course, the students are guided in designing a capstone service-learning project that addresses the needs of their chosen partner to create a mutually beneficial outcome.

By enrolling in "Indigenous education: A call to action," our students have been immersed in authentic learning experiences that extend learning well beyond the classroom and into community settings. This article highlights reflections from our students on the creation, design, and realization of their own critical service-learning projects in response to the *Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada* (2015) 94 Calls to Action.<sup>1</sup> Motivated by the work of Indigenous scholars (Donald, 2012; Hanson & Daniels, 2015; King, 2012; McMaster, 1992; Author & Daniels, 2014; Smith, 2012), and allied scholars (Davis & Shpuniarsky, 2010; Regan, 2010), our students worked daily alongside Elders of both Cree and Blackfoot ancestry in the summer courses to imagine and conceptualize a project of reconciliation. These diverse print traditions walked alongside the voices of our *kehtayak* (Elders) in ceremony and out on the land, and were brought to life through digital stories, songs and artwork, and other contemporary aesthetic expressions (Dylan & Robinson, 2013). Each of the ten days in the summer are meant

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<sup>1</sup> In accordance with REB requirements around service-learning projects, the specifics of each project have been anonymized to ensure community partner confidentiality.

to carefully mentor and guide our students in their next two courses which involve designing and enacting a service-learning project that responds to a specific Call to Action.

In taking up this work, students arrived at powerful insights that help to inform an emerging area of scholarship termed reconciliatory pedagogy (Postras Pratt & Danyluk, 2017). In this work where Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples are asked to come together in the spirit of reconciliation, the service-learning aspect of our program requires a strong sense of ethical positioning framed in an overall commitment to social justice (Brown, 2005; Cipolle, 2010). We also recognize our students' experiences as deeply transformative learning (Mezirow & Associates, 2000) that arises from an axis of discomfort (Boler & Zembylas, 2003) aligned with a sense of deep trust. As Canadians who see the risk of sitting back and waiting for others to take up this work, our beliefs align with that of the TRC where we believe it is time to move beyond talking about reconciliation to the critical steps of creating action. As our own response to these calls, we highlight key lessons from students as they embarked on their own paths of discovery. As Regan (2010) reminds us, the work of reconciliation involves "small, courageous experiments happening everywhere" (p. 237). In recognizing service-learning programs that involve Indigenous peoples and communities as acts of reconciliatory pedagogy, we maintain reconciliatory learning as some of the most impactful learning students can undertake in contemporary times. The following student reflections are examples of such courageous acts as our students share what they have learned about themselves through the process of reconciliation.

### **SARAH BEECH: AN ARTS-BASED INITIATIVE WITH MIDDLE SCHOOL STUDENTS ON MURDERED AND MISSING INDIGENOUS WOMEN, GIRLS, AND TWO-SPIRITED PEOPLE**

As a public school teacher in a large urban setting, my initial goal in this work was to use art for reconciliation purposes with my students. In my position as an arts educator, I initially thought of reconciliation as a "drop in a pond" where one small act might ripple out to my school community. What I learned was that our stories and our acts weave together, impacting one another to make a whole community for social change. The project my teaching partner and I started with our grade nine students led me to a foundational shift at the core of my being. I learned that those who supported my work, along with my emotional and intellectual growth, were critical to moving ahead in this emotionally dense environment. What I also realized is that praxis-based learning opportunities such as critical service-learning projects require strong interpersonal connections with relationships at its core.<sup>2</sup> At the end of this process, I now ask myself: How do I go about life as I did before when I am so changed by this experience? For me, it seems continuing status quo is impossible as the heart-to-heart conversations continue to create change and teach truths.

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<sup>2</sup> A compelling look inside the grade nine (2017-18) classroom of W.D. Pratt School and what educators and students have managed to accomplish through a critical engagement with the arts and the darker truths of Canada can be found at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1DOcRYP7JgIApjoF9YGyiR9JI6VNZ-QLL/view?usp=sharing>

### **ALYSSA FEHR: WORKING WITH INDIGENOUS YOUTH AT RISK THROUGH AESTHETIC EXPRESSIONS**

In my role as a public school educator who specializes in literature, I see the work of reconciliation as made up of equal parts courage and determination, with a generous dose of humility for good measure. Situated as a non-Indigenous woman with years of teaching experience, I have now learned to check my privilege and to use my voice judiciously while I consider my intersecting roles as a teacher, a student, a mother, and a citizen. From my critical service-learning project, I have gained empathy and insight into the experiences of young Indigenous people in my community through their sharing of life experiences. Their experiences have instilled in me a deep commitment to honouring the truth of every individual's story, and a new and deeper understanding of the complexities inherent in social change. As Canadians, we hold the keys to reconciliation within us; may we all find the strength to listen and to learn from one another as we rebuild our relationships and reimagine our world.

### **SARAH CHARLEBOIS: WORKING WITH AN ELDER TO SHARE TEACHINGS**

As an elementary school teacher and a non-Indigenous woman, the “Call to Action” program at the University of Calgary has taught me many valuable lessons. Among them, I deem one to be the most important of all: the inherent value of relationships. I have learned that relationship-building cannot be rushed nor forced and that it begins with listening. As a non-Indigenous woman new to the work of reconciliation, it took time for me to learn how to *truly* listen. In fact, it also took months for my capstone project to unfold as I came to understand that it was not really a project but rather the building of a relationship with an Elder. An important relationship is one that is able to unlock minds and break down walls, and one that requires open ears, time, and nurturing to build and maintain. I was reminded of the work of Davis and Shpuniarsky (2010) who cautioned those taking up this type of work: “Relationship-building is an ongoing process where respect and trust are built over time. Building personal relations of respect is key to being able to work together successfully” (p. 337). It is my belief that our country cannot, and will not, move forward in a collective state of harmony and equality unless, and until, Indigenous and non-Indigenous people form meaningful relationships with one another. This is the aim of reconciliation.

### **CLANCY EVANS: BRINGING AN INDIGENOUS EDUCATION CAMP TO EXPERIENCED EDUCATORS**

As an arts-based educator, the “Call to Action” program inspired me to embrace disruption within education and, furthermore, to deeply and critically analyze my place within reconciliation as an educator and instructional leader. I believe doing this work right requires educators and other professionals to challenge entrenched approaches to Indigenous education and instead adopt a more relational pedagogy within their professional practice. Instructional leaders also need to model how discomfort is a necessary part of this work where examinations of power and privilege form the basis of this examination. Professional educators can incorporate a reconciliatory pedagogy by integrating Indigenous artists and storytellers into their classes, and modelling self-reflection to embrace the complexity of this work. Through my project based on reconciliatory professional development, I practiced working alongside my fellow collaborators, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, with humility. I gained valuable knowledge in understanding

my positionality within a large, collaborative endeavor which involved Indigenous and non-Indigenous teachers, administrators, leaders, Elders, and artists utilizing their expertise and experience in the service of reconciliation.

### **MANDY NIELSEN: APPRECIATING INDIGENOUS CONTRIBUTIONS IN A SOUTHERN ALBERTA COMMUNITY**

My experience within the service-learning component of the “Indigenous Education: A Call to Action” program has been a journey of learning and unlearning, as well as an opportunity to alter the paradigm within which I interact with the world. While my service-learning project fell short of meeting my initial objectives, the learning gleaned from this experience has been invaluable. The most important insights that I learned from this experience in an attempt to enact reconciliation are as follows: i) sit in the unsettled and commit to altering relationships with Indigenous Peoples; ii) listen with ears, mind, and heart to the lived experiences of others in an effort to learn and understand; iii) wait patiently for the right opportunity to engage and support reconciliation; and, iv) commit to taking action when it does present itself. This work can’t be forced; nonetheless, action must be taken. I have faith that there is a reason for why things did not turn out the way I had planned; perhaps it wasn’t the right time for myself or the organizations whom I approached. Only time will tell.

### **ANGELA SANREGRET: YOUTH CONFERENCE INVOLVING INDIGENOUS AND NON-INDIGENOUS STUDENTS**

As a Cree-Métis educator, I have worked in Indigenous communities, specifically First Nations and Métis, throughout my career and this working experience has raised many questions as to the effectiveness of our current education systems. Through the “Indigenous Education: A Call to Action” program, I have gained insights into why there has been so little progress over the years. Through the knowledge gifted to me by the professors, elders, and my cohort peers, my eyes have been opened to the societal impact of residential schools and other colonial influences on education. Armed with this knowledge and understanding, my passion grew as I began to learn more about Treaty rights, and other inherent rights of the First Peoples of Canada. In this learning journey, I began to ask myself how I fit into this work. What I have discovered is that the key to this transformative learning is to understand who we are as Indigenous and non-Indigenous people, and in using this self-knowledge, determine for ourselves what our place in reconciliation is. Once we have a solid idea of who we are and what our responsibilities are, we can situate ourselves in this work to affect positive change. My life has completely changed over this past year, and I now recognize my responsibilities as a Métis iskwew (woman), nehiyaw (Cree person), and educational leader who can inspire the work of reconciliation in all learners.

### **DISCUSSION**

As university instructors walking alongside graduate students in the largely unexplored territory of reconciliation, we recognize the many pitfalls and challenges of this work (Regan, 2010). At the same time, we believe it is vital that we learn alongside our students and their community partners. A key lesson learned is that a requisite amount of humility extends not only to students but also to ourselves as co-learners in this complex work. We have also learned that when the students’ efforts do not result in what they had envisioned, there is still a substantial

amount of learning that takes place. In several cases, we have heard that students have continued their reconciliatory work beyond the program. Through ongoing discussions with our students we have begun to further our reconciliatory model (Postras Pratt & Danyluk, 2018) in an effort to represent the complexity of the work of reconciliation. Through insightful glimpses into the *Call to Action* program, our students shared the impacts of reconciliatory learning on their professional and personal lives. For one student, the greatest lesson was how to balance courage and determination with that of humility. Another spoke of the significance of building relationships as opposed to completing a project. Several students, Indigenous and non-Indigenous, shared the importance of embracing the discomfort of not knowing our nation's colonial past as a catalyst for change. In the space of reconciliatory pedagogy, embracing the discomfort of not knowing while coming together to learn previously unspoken truths is, in our opinion, an essential part of this relational work. Moreover, we embrace the fact that learning can take place unexpectedly. To this point, one student believed her project fell short of expectations as various challenges made the work untenable; yet, the lessons learned were invaluable. We suggest that in the terrain of reconciliatory pedagogy, there are no failures as long as the work is done respectfully and prioritizes the needs of the community. In this space, valuable lessons are learned.

## CONCLUSION

As pathfinders, we are working together to determine the best way forward on the road to reconciliation. Through academic and pragmatic engagement in an emerging area of scholarship, we are working alongside our students in creating new knowledge based on a synthesis of theory, aesthetics, and meaningful community engagement. In sharing our journeys of transformative learning and authentic learning with one another, we continue to explore the complexities and challenges of reconciliatory work and we share these collective lessons as one way to teach and inspire others. As with any meaningful journey, there will be missteps along the way but as long as we remain open to the lessons, the hope of reconciliation remains.

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