

A Collective Classroom Journey with Talking Circles: Addressing the TRC's Calls to Action for Educators

"I can't believe that I'm doing this type of exercise in biology class!"

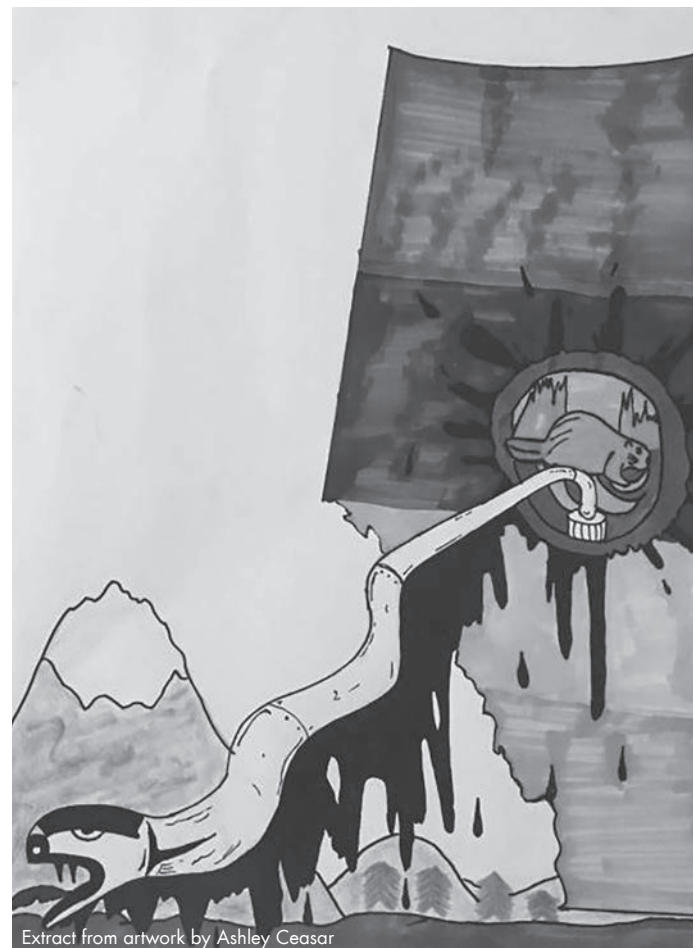
Last January, I used talking circles to introduce my students to the term project for our General Biology 1 class. I was inspired to use this method by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action for educators and educational institutions. *Call 62: Provide the necessary funding to post-secondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms.* I was privileged to be included in Vanier's Indigenous Education training during the Winter 2018 semester, thanks to Jacky Vallée's hard work. This training and investment are worthwhile and should continue; what I gained, and what I think others will gain, is a necessary understanding of indigenous history in Canada and a unique perspective on learning. Personally, my sense of gratitude is overwhelming. The Indigenous Education program challenged me, and yet it gave me a newfound sense of peace. As a participant in the program alongside my Vanier colleagues and as a participant in talking circles, engaging in a democratic dynamic with my students, my approach to teaching has been transformed. Now it's up to me to integrate what I've learned into the classroom.

My initial goal last semester was to integrate some of the topics and techniques to fulfill my responsibility as a student of the Indigenous Education program. Another very important goal was that my students could benefit from perspectives gained through the Indigenous methods I had learned. It was challenging, though; the majority of my students – around 80% – had no knowledge of residential schools or the Sixties Scoop. I am proud of the students I teach; I want them to be knowledgeable and equipped with the tools to act in the best interest of their communities, but I don't want them to participate in the social biases that currently exist against Indigenous people. I want them, as young and developing scientists, to gain a new perspective and to value their work by accounting for its impact on the land and the people who have traditionally lived here, instead of limiting their scope to the pursuit of statistical significance.

The term project assignment was to explore a Canadian ecological issue from the perspective of the indigenous peoples who are directly impacted. I wanted to use an indigenous way of learning to introduce the idea of indigenous perspective and to continue to revisit their developing reflections on topics of indigenous perspective throughout the semester. In a talking circle, the teacher is not the leader or manager of a conversation. My only role in this work was to introduce the talking point. The talking point is my term for a prompt that initiates the discussion. In one instance, I read students an origin story (*Skywoman and Turtle Island*); in another I read them the story of *Ki'et'sa'kun*, written by Antonio Graydon (Snuneymuxw in BC).

The other talking points concerned the social and ecological effects of North America's colonization, threats to species from expanding cities, and urban ecology including co-existence with coyotes.

The talking point is introduced, and it occupies the center of our focus, the collective psychic centre of our circle. In the circle, each participant is given equal opportunity to share their reflections on the talking point. This is the most democratic process I have ever experienced in my life! It's a vulnerable process to go through, but equally vulnerable for all participants, including for me as their teacher. My role in this exercise is different from my regular classroom practice. I do not direct the progress of the discussion to get it "back on track"; each participant has an equal role in shaping the direction of the discussion. The agenda for everyone is simply to gain new perspectives and a fuller understanding of the talking point from the diverse viewpoints of the talking circle participants.



Extract from artwork by Ashley Ceasar



Extract from artwork by Erin Williams

According to their feedback, students enjoyed the rules of process for the talking circle. When speaking, each participant holds a designated object; when they are finished sharing their perspective on the talking point, they pass the object to the person beside them. Reflections of participants can springboard from what another speaker contributed, but they cannot be directed to a single person. The focus of contributions must always be the talking point. In fact, during the most recent talking circle, this Fall 2018 semester, I introduced the unit test they had just written as the talking point. This is the only time that I didn't participate in the circle as a speaker. The collective sharing of sighs and laughter was a strong indication that the talking circle method is a powerful method for listening that fosters empathy.

The talking circle approach provides opportunities for authentic listening. This is challenging for teachers to achieve, as we're usually the ones doing a lot of the talking and directing in our classes. However, it's also tough to witness misunderstanding, and it's even more difficult to hear as biased perspectives against Indigenous people are revealed.

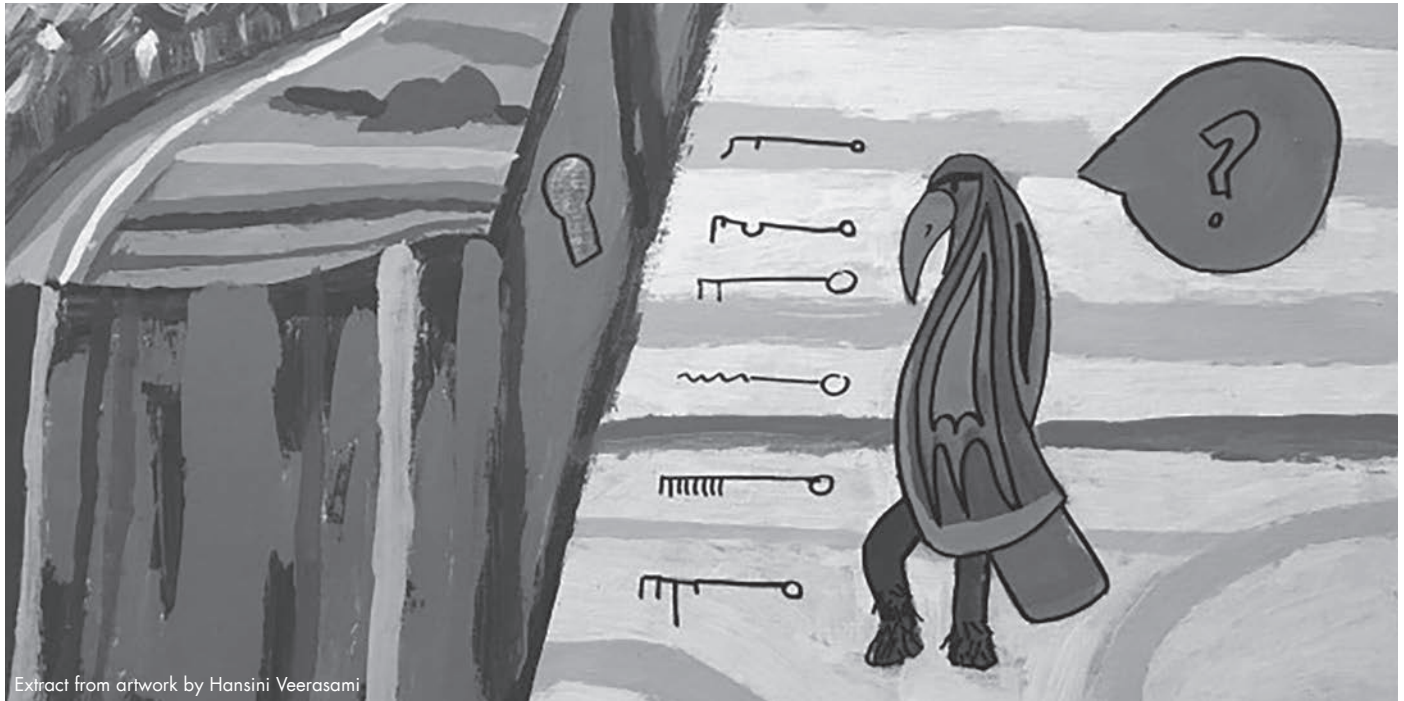
The practice of talking circles is also a mind-bend for the participating students. It's tough for the students to see the teacher as an equal in the circle. Often students seek approval from me for their contribution, or they directly ask me questions rather than claim the opportunity

to share their perspective. Other, more unexpected struggles are revealed. For example, some wonderfully honest responses from students during the first class's talking circle included "I've heard all this stuff on residential schools and the Sixties Scoop now, and now I don't know what to believe!" and "Well, isn't this just survival of the fittest?" These were very difficult responses to hear, and they made me question if I should continue doing talking circles with these students. But we continued. During the training my colleagues and I received in Kahnawá:ke, the leaders often repeated, "It takes the time it takes." The projects submitted by my students at the end of the Winter 2018 semester demonstrated that they had thought through something that was new to them. They weren't simply delivering the "correct" scientific answer or solution; they were open. For example, one student who had been resistant at first ended up producing a very thought-provoking essay on the exclusion of Inuit consultation in drafting Canada's climate strategy. I believe that as young scientists, they were also learning to re-

claim something that has been lost in mainstream science culture. To approach nature as something that is a part of a student's experience in a more holistic way builds empathy and deeper understanding rather than something to study from an emotionally disengaged distance.

Diverse participation in science is extremely important for ensuring that diverse perspectives are represented.

Science isn't all about measuring; it's more about the application of methods for finding paths to truth. The reasoning (or logic) behind this set of operational rules is to test a belief (that is, an explanation of a phenomenon), and to reject it if it doesn't produce the results we expect. If, however, we can support the belief from testing it once, we can retest it in many new and different ways to determine the limits of this truth and look for the conditions for when it fails. This is the way to truth that we as scientists pretty much all agree on. It's a robust method that gets results. It's been the method that's helped us build knowledge in a collaborative international community. The respect and power held by the scientific community makes it very attractive to our young people. There is security in a future in science.

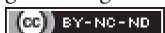


Extract from artwork by Hansini Veerasami

I wanted to push my students to consider a new perspective in their term projects, a perspective that intentionally avoided projects with “scientific” solutions based on “scientific” measures, something we are all overly familiar with. Most of my students submitted projects that were artistic expressions of the “measures” of ecological effects on the Indigenous people of their chosen area. They included studies of the medicine and stories of the people, the role of important animals in their culture, and they recounted heartbreaking tragedies such as the fallout from the hydroelectric developments of the James Bay Project and the stories of the missing and murdered Indigenous women and girls of BC’s Highway 16, the Highway of Tears. Project submissions included videos, songs, paintings, embroidery, scrapbooks and stories.

Increasingly, academic and research institutions are investing in the promotion of inclusiveness and diversity among the practitioners of science. I believe that this approach is integral to increasing the quality of science, since a rich diversity of people brings a rich diversity of perspectives and a diversity of ways to consider and test phenomena. As a teacher, I am training new scientists, and I feel that I’m serving them and society better if I challenge them to consider the perspective of those who knew the land intimately before European colonization. This may also challenge them to question the culture of some science fields, which, for the sake of quantifiable measures, exclude valuable people and perspectives that are tied to their research. Diverse participation in science is extremely important for ensuring that diverse perspectives are represented. Science can be done in a better way to serve our communities better.

I still can’t put my finger on *exactly* why I’m enjoying my teaching practice more than ever before. I think a powerful reason is that the Indigenous Education at Vanier has taught me how to listen. My gratitude grows.



Stephanie Felkai
is a Biology teacher.

Student work:

Song by Mark Kandaleft: <https://biologyyawinter2018.wordpress.com/author/markandaleft/>

Painting by Ashley Caesar: <https://biologyyawinter2018.wordpress.com/author/ashleycaesar/>

Embroidery by Erin Williams:
<https://biologyyawinter2018.wordpress.com/2018/05/31/the-culling-of-wolves-in-the-yukon/>

Artwork by Léa Nadeau: <https://biologyyawinter2018.wordpress.com/2018/05/25/crow-river/>

Artwork by Gabriella Ricci: <https://biologyyawinter2018.wordpress.com/2018/05/30/mikisew-cree-first-nation/>

Artwork by Hansini Veerasami: <https://biologyyawinter2018.wordpress.com/2018/05/25/135/>

Project by Rodrigo Galiana-Audet: <https://youtu.be/MAMszGMxqIo>