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Do You Know Where You Are? Bringing Indigenous Teaching Methods into the Classroom

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Abstract

Within sociological literature, Indigenous Studies and settler colonial theoretical frameworks are beginning to be regarded with greater respect and consideration. Yet, the discipline still struggles to emerge from the grasp of settler colonial assumptions; we continue to wait for U.S. Sociology to acknowledge and appreciate that all teaching, learning, and research on Turtle Island takes place on Indigenous homeland. It is a tall task to "decolonize" sociology as a field; however, Indigenous feminist scholars remind us of our responsibilities to critique problems *and* to offer a generative pathway forward. We take up this charge and offer our experiences and suggestions for how we can take steps toward decolonizing our college classrooms. In this article, a professor and two students write about our differing and shared experiences of learning together in an Indigenous Methodologies graduate seminar at a research-intensive university. We approached the class, and this article, with the following question: What if we were able to imagine a classroom experience that nurtured and inspired us to be in good relation with the Indigenous peoples and homelands on which our classrooms are built? We share our experiences and suggest tools we all may use to bring Indigenous teaching methods into our classrooms, and into our lives outside the classrooms.

Keywords

American Indians, curriculum, decolonization, Indigenous, education

Fabrizio Pelak (2019:300) writes that

> American sociologists have developed powerful concepts, theories, and pedagogies to understand and to teach about the complexities of race and white supremacy. However, we have yet to engage the work of American Indian and Indigenous studies scholars who theorize U.S. settler colonialism and legitimized racism.

We agree and ask readers in the United States to consider: How many American Indian/Alaska Native (AIAN) K-12 teachers have you had? How many AIAN professors have you taken classes from? How many AIAN faculty are in your departments? One final question: How many AIAN scholars did you cite in your most recent paper?

We ask these questions to raise readers' awareness of how common it is to feel separated from or ignorant about Indigenous peoples. This is an intended outcome of settler colonialism, and these knowledge gaps are deeply harmful to all peoples. All schooling (and life) in the United States takes place on Indigenous homeland, yet Indigenous

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presence is often erased. From an Indigenous perspective, if you do not know where you are, you are lost.

We believe that using Indigenous teaching and learning methods in our classrooms can help us counter the settler colonial violence that is an integral structure in western society. This work is necessary to imagine the possibilities of decolonizing our institutions and our lives. To help us organize our thoughts and structure our work, we use Waziyatawin and Yellow Bird's (2005:5) definition of decolonization:

> the intelligent, calculated, and active resistance to the forces of colonialism that perpetuate the subjugation and/or exploitation of our minds, bodies, and lands, and . . . is engaged for the ultimate purpose of overturning the colonial structure and realizing Indigenous liberation.

Centering Indigenous teaching and learning methods is one way to bring about much needed change in our society (Greene 2020). We realize that engaging this work inside the settler colonial academy has limitations, and acknowledge that we are each responsible for engaging decolonizing work in whatever settings we find ourselves, however imperfect our efforts may be. In the spirit of collaboration and hope, we share our experiences in order to provide one model of first steps toward decolonizing the academy. For us, this work is the beginning of an "elsewhere" (Tuck and Yang 2012).

LITERATURE REVIEW

Following McKay (2019:4) we maintain that "processes of identity construction, maintenance, ascription, and enforcement are indicative of racialization in our society" and that the combining of Indigenous peoples into one group causes "the erasure of their independent governments, cultures, and histories." These modes of oppression are reified and reinforced in federal, state and local education policies. Furthermore, "these sociohistorical contexts of power, wealth generation, and the construction of identity often overlook relationships with and manipulations of the natural environment" (Norgaard, Reed, and Bacon 2018:100) which further alienate students from their responsibilities to, and relationship with, all peoples and our more-than-human relatives.

We agree with Jennifer L. Hochschild (2003) that the U.S. system of public schooling is not "broken" and that settler colonial schooling projects have been an effective machine for the reproduction of our deeply stratified U.S. society (Anyon 1980). Within settler colonial schooling's emphasis on competition and consumption, individuals are cut off from each other, from their place on the earth, and their communities—even their own immediate families. Often, they are not able to think well, to be creative and happy, or to thrive under these conditions.

Indigenous teaching methods center the needs and priorities of Indigenous students and communities and maintain culture keepers and Elders as the experts. Instructors engage Indigenous leaders and Elders regarding curricular priorities and methods for delivering instruction, and Indigenous students who hold cultural knowledge are regarded as possessing expertise. This dismantling of the traditional western notion of power and knowledge hierarchies in classrooms respects Indigenous ways of conceptualizing horizontal forms of hierarchy, aka power sharing (e.g., Black and Jacob 2020; Sabzalian 2019; Smith 2012; Wilson 2008).

Understanding the importance of place-based education is a main goal of Indigenous teaching methods, and asks educators to "start with *place*, for example . . . direct[ing] educators to Indigenous peoples [of their state/region]" (Sabzalian 2019:130). In addition, educators are encouraged to start "with the *present*" (Sabzalian 2019: 130) as a way to disrupt the colonial logics that render Indigenous peoples as vanished, a myth implied by state curricular standards that discuss Native people exclusively in pre-1900 eras (Shear, Sabzalian, and Buchanan 2018). This process encourages educators to "become practiced at recognizing how colonialism surfaces" (Sabzalian 2019:201).

OUR STORIES

Next we focus on the context of our class, an Indigenous Methodologies graduate course. During the school year that we participated in this course, our university's student population was 59 percent white, 0.6 percent AIAN, 11 percent Hispanic or Latino, 2 percent Black, with the remaining majority of students being international. The course we are discussing, perhaps because of its content, had a disproportionately higher (36 percent) proportion of AIAN students.

We present individual reflections, then weave together continuing shared dreams for ways we can decolonize our classrooms, imagining something different than what we currently experience in the settler colonial academy. In the course, students

completed weekly individual journal assignments (Jason and Epplen 2016) which served as a space to engage both the course material (readings and supplementary material) and to reflect on their own stories (Bell 2003; Giroux 1997) as learners, educators, and members of a scholarly community built upon Indigenous homeland. Some of the journaling prompts included the questions: Why am I here? What did I bring? How am I today? How do I want to be?

Student journaling can be a powerful tool, and the choice of journaling as a main assignment for the course was an intentional one that respects students as holding knowledge and carrying cultural lessons, as well as a way for students to engage the specific place/land upon which they are seeking a graduate education (Black and Jacob 2020). The professor also completed reflections each week, to process ideas and emotions about the class.

Stephany: As someone who hopes to be a professor that incorporates Indigenous methods into all my work, this course is important to me. Class begins, and our professor tells us that we are going to start with some quiet time to ourselves, and that doing so outside is the best option. We are to take time to relax and be calm and pay attention to what the land is telling us. It's a beautiful day, sunny and a comfortable temperature and I notice how the sun feels on the skin of my face and arms. I smell the grass that's just been mowed and something sweet, which I can't identify. I hear people talking and cars in the distance, but I also hear birds and a squirrel. After a few minutes, I do feel more calm and much more ready to be part of class, to participate in an authentic and genuine way that is somewhat different than the way I usually "do class." This place has changed my thoughts and my heart, and helped me be ready to learn and grow.

Deanna: As I walk up to the building, it smells glorious. I think these are Douglas Firs. In Ichishkíin the tree's name is *Pápsh*. I could not have been more happy when Dr. Jacob asked us to all go back outside. Into that Doug Fir air! We went outside first thing every class. Sometimes she asked us to walk around, sometimes she reminded us just to sit and notice. I spent almost every time under one particular tree on the other side of the building from the Dougs—there was a perfect little hiding nest where another conifer let her branches fall all the way to the ground. I hid in there; sometimes I would write, sometimes I would think; sometimes I would just lean against the trunk. Mostly I felt my mother there—the earth, the tree, supporting and embracing me, reminding me the that I really can do this whole PhD thing.

Michelle: I'm so annoyed! Our classroom is the worst. Well, even in a terrible classroom, what really matters are the students. Mostly from my department, but some from across the university. When we talk about students' experiences, they generally seem stressed out. This is normal. Graduate students, and faculty, often seem . . . unhappy, on the way to burnout. But does it have to be that way? Can we figure out ways to feel more grounded? To make education more nurturing? I talk about these ideas with my students, our future leaders. I notice they are more hopeful and creative after they have an opportunity to intentionally engage with the beautiful Kalapuya homeland upon which our dreaded classroom sits.

DISCUSSION

Our learning was purposely shaped by an Indigenous learning method: beginning each class by interacting with the land around us. This experiential and sometimes emotional engagement was different than previous experiences with schooling, and gave us the opportunity to learn in a new and different way, to begin to decolonize our thoughts and our conceptions of how a class should be structured. This powerful lesson was affirmed each class session: in order to understand how our minds, bodies, and Indigenous lands are subjugated and exploited, we need to detach from the hypercapitalist, competitive, alienating norms of graduate education. One way of doing this is to connect to place, to study and understand the history of place, and to accept responsibility for our part in decolonization.

When we had the opportunity to pause and sit quietly outside, we often had profound thoughts or memories that helped us process our potential to be strong Indigenous leaders or non-Indigenous allies in the process of decolonization. Making time to be in/with place and land at the beginning of our class allowed us to be more fully present and connected with those around us during our class time, and to have a richer and more meaningful learning experience. It helped us see how we could be more and do more in this struggle. By doing so, we upheld the call in the literature to start with place and start in the present.

We developed a draft land acknowledgment in our class. This is a statement recounting the history of Indigenous land dispossession, as well as acknowledging the Indigenous claims to, and responsibility for, the place in which our university

is located. We felt the statement was an important starting point, as many students were severely limited in their understanding of Indigenous histories of place—in Indigenous terms, they didn't even know where they were. Such knowledge is a gift: now students understand their school, the University of Oregon, is on Kalapuya Indigenous homeland.

By beginning each class quietly spending time with and on Kalapuya homelands, we created space for and among the students to build the capacity to collectively develop a draft land acknowledgment. Learning from place and using experiential wisdom as a teaching tool allowed all students, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, to come together to collaborate on this task. Without that connection to place and to each other, without understanding where we were, we could not have articulated an appropriate and respectful land acknowledgment.

We collaborated on researching, writing, and revising this statement; then we engaged in workshopping the revisions to the statement, reaching consensus through a collaborative and collective process during class. Knowing that we needed to honor and respect Kalapuya peoples, our professor then took the statement to a meeting of the Tribal Advisory Council for the university, and made minor revisions suggested by the Tribal education leaders on whose homeland our institution was built. It is important and necessary to build and maintain relationships with the Indigenous people on whose homelands our university was built, and conferring with them on the appropriateness of our draft land acknowledgment was an important aspect of this work. In this process, we respected a main tenet of the decolonization literature: that expertise on Indigenous matters is held among Indigenous leaders and culture keepers, and their knowledge should be centered when attempting to decolonize our curriculum and institutions. This land acknowledgment is now widely used to begin university classes, as well as larger formal functions and events, including graduation ceremonies.

We agree with Eve Tuck and K. Wayne Yang (2012) that decolonization cannot be a metaphor, with symbolic gestures that allow settlers to enact moves to innocence. Land acknowledgements are not enough. They are an important first step, but need to be accompanied by structural changes including the hiring and retention of Indigenous staff and faculty; funding and support for Indigenous students; funding for collaborative projects with Tribal Nations that center Indigenous priorities. Each of the authors is involved in this critical decolonizing work across multiple Indigenous communities and educational institutions. We encourage all readers to dive in—build relationships, use your expertise to benefit the peoples on whose homeland your institution sits.

By employing these two Indigenous teaching and learning methods in our course, we connected to the place in which we were learning; this also provided for richer relationships with each other. In setting aside conventional class norms, we made our educational experience more nurturing and enjoyable. Decolonization is a long-term project and process. It is only sustainable if done with a spirit of hope and in ways that build community. Using fairly straightforward Indigenous teaching and learning methods created a better learning experience for all: the students, the instructor, the land and place. These methods are well known in Indigenous communities, as they are deeply rooted in Indigenous philosophies that guide people on how to seek information, and to improve oneself (Barnhardt and Kawagley 2016; Battiste 2016; Merculieff and Roderick 2013).

CONCLUSION

In this article, we have discussed two examples (student journals written outside and developing an Indigenous land acknowledgment) of how we engaged Indigenous teaching methods. These are basic examples that anyone can use and are good starting points for any class. One might question whether a non-Indigenous instructor can engage in the teaching methods we've described. We insist: yes! Settlers have an important role and place in decolonizing our institutions and are a huge and much-needed workforce! Less than 1 percent of faculty are American Indian/Alaska Native (U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics 2019). We call on the more than 99 percent to help in this struggle. We also want to remind readers that settler colonialism is damaging to everyone—it fractures and divides us; healing is needed so we can be whole people in our collective work to decolonize.

Within Indigenous cultural teachings, the idea of land as pedagogy is foundational, "[l]and education puts Indigenous epistemological and ontological accounts of land at the center, including Indigenous understandings of land, Indigenous language in relation to land, and Indigenous critiques of settler colonialism" (Tuck, McKenzie, and McCoy 2014). We urge sociologists to consider such an approach. The sociology of race and ethnicity has accomplished much necessary and critical work; yet, Indigenous peoples are still too often left out of the

analyses that take place on Indigenous homelands. We encourage faculty to get outside: "by extending race-based theories to consider ongoing colonization and the importance of land to Native peoples, sociology instructors can offer students a set of powerful concepts and knowledge to start recognizing discursive 'moves to innocence' that resist decolonization" (Fabrizio Pelak 2019:301).

Do you know where you are?

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Stephany RunningHawk Johnson, a member of the Oglala Lakota nation, focuses her research on recruiting, retaining and supporting Indigenous students attending universities and majoring in science fields, with a particular emphasis on how the philosophy behind the way science courses are taught creates barriers for Indigenous students, as well as other students of color. Stephany is interested in working with local Tribes to incorporate place-based education and Indigenous Traditional Ecological Knowledges in order to increase Indigenous students' sense of identity and belonging in a university setting. She is also conducting research on how non-Indigenous instructors can begin to decolonize their curriculum and teaching practices. All of Stephany's work is done through an Indigenous Feminist lens and is dedicated to supporting Nation building, Tribal sovereignty, and empowering Indigenous communities and students in working toward social justice.

Deanna Chappell is a white motherscholar, teacher, school counselor, and administrator, who grew up on the lands of the Lenape and Algonquin peoples. She is a PhD candidate at the University of Oregon. Her dissertation examines activist work by non-Native teachers, looking for places that white settler people can work with and learn from Indigenous activists, teachers, and Indigenous Feminist philosophy. Other academic interests include service-learning, social studies teaching, democracy, and young adult literature.