

Towards Indigenizing University Policy

kakwe-iyiniwasta kihci-kiskinwahamâtowikamikohk wiyasiwâcikanisa

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Abstract

This paper explores some of the challenges associated with Indigenizing Canadian universities. Like Indigenous scholars elsewhere, we seek guidance on how to undertake university Indigenization, and failing to find other examples we have decided to share our experiences here. This case study describes one event (hosting a feast and round dance) which provoked institutional policy reforms. We identify ways in which our struggle to reform policy was hampered by epistemic ignorance (Kuokkanen, 2007). We also explain how we understand our responsibilities to address epistemic ignorance while concurrently changing the organizations in which we work.

ôta kê-masinahikâtek

ôma masinahikanis kitâpahtamok ohi kê-mônîskâkocik kakwe-iyiniwastacik kihci-kiskinwahamâtowikamikohkwa. peyakwan ôki iyiniwak kê-atoskecik ekotowihk, kiskiyihtamok e-nohtepayihk awiyahk ta-nîkânistahk. mistahi nanitonamohk tânisi ka-isi-nâkwaniyek mâka wîyawâw sôskwâc âcimosôwak ôma e-isi-wâpahtâkik. Tâpiskôc ôma peyak (e-kîstîpohk ekwa e-pîcîcînihke) ekwa kî-tâwakiskamok ohi wiyasiwâcikanisa kakwe-mîskotastâcîc. ekota wâpahtamok poko kwayas kakwe takwastâcîc wiyasiwâcikanisa ekosi nawâc ta-miyo-mâmawi-atoskewak.

Background

Canadian universities, like universities elsewhere, are rooted in dominant worldviews that require unpacking and remaking in order to effect institutional changes that are inclusive of Indigenous scholars, students, and worldviews. Indigenization works from the assumption that Indigenous peoples have histories, cultures, and ways of knowing that have been excluded in the mainstream academy. Kuokkanen (2007) states, “generally speaking, the academy does not recognize the ontologies and epistemologies held by its indigenous students. Instead it expects students to leave their ontological and epistemological assumptions and perceptions at the gates of the academy” (p. 2). Indigenization is a process that attempts to re-centre Indigenous epistemologies and ontologies, not only for learners but for those of us who serve as faculty and staff.

The authors are actively involved in university Indigenization. As Indigenous faculty members, we strive towards decolonizing and Indigenizing our teaching, service, and research. We both serve as members of the university Aboriginal Advisory Circle (AAC) to the President of our university. We collaborate with one another, and with our colleagues on the AAC. Dr. Pete also serves as the Executive Lead: Indigenization. Our everyday conversations about our needs and desires for Indigenization resulted in our making some very real, and hopefully lasting, organizational change. We present here, the story of our work to reform university policy; a process that was necessary if greater levels of Indigenization were to be possible.

An Indigenous Research Framework

Our work towards Indigenization emerged through our conversations. Our conversations were framed around the idea of dialogic participation.

The conversational method is of significance to Indigenous methodologies because it is a method of gathering knowledge based on oral story telling tradition congruent with an Indigenous paradigm. It involves a dialogic participation that holds a deep purpose of sharing story as a means to assist others. It is relational at its core. (Kovach, 2010 p.1)

For the past two years, the authors met informally to discuss our vision for, and practice of, Indigenization. We felt that these conversations would provide us with a consensus view of the path towards Indigenization that could then be shared with our colleagues throughout the university. We now understand that, like ourselves, Indigenous faculty in other universities are looking for models for their own Indigenization efforts. We offer them the gifts of our experience so that their efforts can, perhaps, be easier than our own were.

Frequently during these informal discussions, one or both of the authors would conclude that we should have been tape-recording the conversations. As consolation, Dr. Pete began to make notes based on the ongoing dialogues. Additionally, our email conversations allowed us to track our emerging understanding of our pressing needs; in this case, policy reform. To take the conversation a step further, the authors met with the AAC chair, an AAC member, and a graduate research assistant, who offered to document our conversation. The notes from that meeting served as the foundation for the paper that we present here.

This non-structured approach to data gathering helped us to better understand the events that we were confronted with. We both understood that our conversational research was about sharing our stories so that we could better understand the organizational changes that we were effecting. This form of storytelling is in keeping with the Indigenous methodologies (Kovach, 2010) that we both respect and practice. Throughout this process, we continued to assert and embrace our responsibility to name and counteract epistemic ignorance and to reform the academy in the name of Indigenization.

Countering Epistemic Ignorance in the Academy

Dr. Pete has often stated, “In spite of a 30 year Aboriginal education policy history in this province, we have been structurally denied the opportunity to learn about First Nations and Métis peoples, their histories, contributions and aspirations,” (Personal communication, April 2012). As Indigenous scholars, we recognize that mainstream universities have marginalized, ignored, erased, segregated, and minimized Indigenous peoples, worldviews, and pedagogies. As a result, we recognize that faculty, students, and administrators often do not know about Indigenous peoples, nor have they been encouraged to do so. In order to address these absences in the university, we are compelled to work towards the re-centering of these knowledge systems and pedagogies to ensure our survival as Indigenous peoples in higher education. We are not naive enough to think that this work is anything but political; nor do we believe that this work is about a lack of knowledge or understanding on the part of mainstream colleagues. We have learned that by proactively working to indigenize the academy, we will come face to face with ‘epistemic ignorance’ (Kuokkanen, 2007).

Epistemic ignorance refers to the “ways in which academic theories and practices marginalize, exclude and discriminate against other than dominant Western epistemic and intellectual traditions” (Kuokkanen, p. 66). Like Kuokkanen, we argue that the university is “saturated by colonial, patriarchal and racist assumptions and practices that define and characterize the conditions of academic and intellectual endeavours” (p. 15). We would also argue that these very assumptions and practices are institutionalized through policy.

We understand that within an institution founded on dominant worldviews, individuals often assume neutrality within that system, as if organizational norms were race-less, class-less and free from bias. From our experience, higher education policies are often presented as if they too were normal and neutral. Policies are seen by many as law, not to be challenged but accepted as status quo. The very idea of challenging, reframing, or Indigenizing policy is often met with indignation on behalf of the policy gatekeepers and enforcers. Yet, as Indigenous scholars, we are abundantly aware of the ways policy formation is framed on dominant norms, and how this serves to limit the potential of indigenization. Indigenous faculty experience a variety of fears and sometimes feel threatened when they continue to practice Indigenous pedagogical practices in their work on campus. In response to these perceptions, Indigenous faculty then engage with and feel compelled to justify their ways to those of the dominant group. Graham Smith (2003) refers to this as the *politics of distraction*. Smith states, the politics of distraction is a “colonizing process of being kept busy by the colonizer, of always being on the ‘back-foot’, ‘responding’, ‘engaging’, ‘accounting’, ‘following’ and ‘explaining’” (p. 2). He continues, by keeping the ‘native’ busy “doing trivial pursuits there will be little time to complain, question or rebel against the status quo” (p. 2). In spite of the distractions from our good work, we both believe the

academy is still a site where powerful transformations can occur. The work of Indigenizing the academy exposes places where dominant structures must be re-made in order to embrace other than dominant ways of knowing and doing. We are committed to taking up this work at the same time as we document the process. With that said, we share our story of remaking policy in our university so that others may achieve greater levels of Indigenization in universities across Canada.

Indigenizing our university

Indigenization efforts at our university are formalized through the university strategic plan, *Peyak Aski Kikawinaw* (University of Regina Strategic Plan, 2015-2020). Both the former strategic plan (*mâmahohkamâtowin*) and our current draft plan feature strong statements in support of Indigenization. The new draft plan has two overarching themes: Indigenization and sustainability. Both of which flow through our three priority areas: student success, community service, and research. The AAC are positioned as powerful informants on the university direction towards greater levels of Indigenization. For the Aboriginal Advisory Circle *Indigenization*:

...refers to the transformation of the existing academy by including Indigenous knowledges, voices, critiques, scholars, students, and materials as well as the establishment of physical and epistemic spaces that facilitate the ethical stewardship of a plurality of Indigenous knowledges and practices so thoroughly as to constitute an essential element of the university. It is not limited to Indigenous people, but encompasses all students and faculty, for the benefit of our academic integrity and our social viability.

The AAC remains committed to increasing the visibility and frequency of events and activities aimed at increasing awareness about Indigenous peoples, experiences, and aspirations. One such event that was offered was the feast and round dance. The following story provides background to policy reforms that emerged as a result of this event.

The Feast and Round Dance

“It all started innocently enough” Dr. Sasakamoose said to Dr. Pete (Recorded communications, September 5, 2013). She recalls

As a new faculty member I was awarded a research grant to facilitate my emerging research program. As an Indigenous person, I was raised to offer gratitude when one receives a blessing. I also felt it was important to ask for guidance to conduct my research in a good way and if possible it is always good to feed the people so a feast was an appropriate ceremony for me to host. Since I work within a university, I also wanted something that would benefit the students, which is reciprocity. While I do not come from a Round Dancing culture, I decided to include this ceremony as well. In our communities, hosting a feast can be as simple as making a pot of soup with tea and bannock and asking an elder for ceremony – often a pipe ceremony. What is truly this simple in our world led to one of the most challenging experiences I have encountered personally and professionally within the western academy.

As Dr. Sasakamoose attempted to host these Indigenous ceremonies she maintained her commitment to *bimadiziwin* (Anishinabe - doing things in a good way) in all that she does, both personally and professionally. For her, this meant maintaining a ceremonial practice, seeking spiritual guidance, and giving back. For her, offering the feast and round dance allowed her to express *bimadiziwin*.

As we look back on the last two years, we now understand that her attempts to do things in a good way were hobbled by a policy framework that made certain limiting assumptions. We now believe these assumptions were rooted in epistemic ignorance (Kuokkanen, 2007). As Dr. Sasakamoose planned for the fall feast and round dance she found herself asserting the following:

A Feast is not a Potluck

Dr. Sasakamoose explained,

A traditional feast typically consists of a wild meat soup (moose, elk, or bison), bannock, berries, and tea all prepared by a woman in her home. The woman would ensure that the food was prepared in a ceremonial way, according to her family or community teachings. Yet, university policy indicated that for groups of 25 or more, outside foods could not be brought onto campus unless it was prepared in a kitchen that was approved by the Provincial Health Inspectors. Additionally, wild meat was not to be used at all... A pot of soup and some bannock was therefore not coming into our university... (Recorded communications, September 5, 2013)

The university catering policy was very specific; organizers were encouraged to use on campus catering services. If organizers wanted to have a meal with 25 or less people, they could hold a potluck, but the food would have to be inspected and cooked in a restaurant/store or based on store bought items; no wild meats were allowed. For events of 25 or more people, outside food supplies had to be store bought and prepared in kitchens that had passed health inspection. The authors understood from their discussions with catering staff that these policies were designed to ensure safe food handling and reduce the risks of food borne illnesses.

As the summer progressed, Dr. Sasakamoose was advised that administration could make a cultural accommodation that would have allowed her to hire an outside caterer; an Aboriginal chef was identified but later declined the offer. In the meantime, Dr. Sasakamoose and now Dr. Pete both began to suggest criteria for a new feasting policy. However, with the external chef stepping away and the feasting policy yet undeveloped, Dr. Sasakamoose had no choice but to go with internal catering services for the feast as the event was only a week away.

Besides planning for the event, Dr. Sasakamoose also spent many hours educating administrative colleagues about the ceremonial nature of the feast, round dance, food preparation, and food service. She had to do both at once: plan the event and provide key lessons to further develop the cultural awareness

and competency of our colleagues. In organizations where epistemic ignorance is rife, Indigenous employees are often distracted from doing their work in a good way by the necessity of educating our colleagues about why it has to be done that way at all.

An added drawback of using university catering services were the exorbitant financial costs associated with a catered meal; the food was neither culturally appropriate, nor was it prepared in the spirit of traditional teachings. However, according to traditional practices, prayers were said over the food prior to serving. In the months following the initial feast and round dance, additional changes were made to the policy under development to institutionalize further entrench the cultural accommodations. The changes included staff, faculty, and students being able to prepare food on campus, in a health inspected facility, under the supervision of a certified food safe kitchen staff member, who was culturally aware and responsive to our desires to smudge the food prior to the food preparation. A year later, the Aboriginal Student Association successfully prepared a more traditionally prepared feast according to the new policy.

Elders are not employees

As Indigenous educators, we believe we were hired not only for our subject area expertise, but also for our understanding and practice of Indigenous ways of knowing, including how we work with Elders and traditional knowledge keepers. We rely on this knowledge and experience as we plan for greater levels of indigenization in our universities. As Dr. Sasakamoose planned for the feast and round dance, she contacted Elders early on, she explained, “I took tobacco to the pipe carriers...I offered tobacco to both male and female elders to attend the feast...I offered tobacco to the drummers...in each case I also informed these individuals that an honorarium would be presented at the event...” (Personal communication, April 8, 2013). All of these initial contacts were undertaken in the spirit of doing things in a good way. As Dr. Sasakamoose began to engage with the university administration regarding these honorariums, she began to confront western institutional norms.

In our university, the Aboriginal Student Centre (ASC) has a long history of working with Elders. They established procedures which included offering Elders an honorarium when they were engaged in cultural work, such as offering a prayer at an event. The staff member would request a cash advance from Financial Services and they could then offer the Elder a cash gift. The Elder signed a receipt for the honorarium and the staff member filed this with a reimbursement claim. This approach worked very well for those occasional or one-off activities; but the language of “work” implies obligations, compensation, and rights that complicate the process of accessing Elder services.

As Dr. Sasakamoose attempted to arrange for honorariums for the Elders, she learned that this was not a simple matter. Managers in Financial Services needed to know whether these Elders had

worked in the university before, and for how long. They explained that if the Elder had worked with the university prior and had earned more than \$499.00 in a year, then any new income became taxable. Dr. Sasakamoose was informed that according to the Canadian Review Agency (CRA), these longer or more frequent engagements with Elders meant that the Elder became an “employee”. The whole process then changed and Dr. Sasakamoose had to submit an invoice for payment on behalf of the Elder. As a result of this shift from honorarium to salary, deductions were imposed, which reduced the amount the Elder received, and contradicted what Dr. Sasakamoose had originally communicated. As an employee, the elder received a salary and would be mailed their cheque based on the printing cycle of the university. This meant that the Elders would not receive their cheque for a few weeks following the event. Dr. Sasakamoose was adamant: Elders are not employees. The institutional procedures and policies towards honouring Elders were limiting. This left us to continue to engage in discussions with Human Resources and Financial Services in ways that would broaden their understanding of the roles that Elders play in our communities.

To make matters worse, as other managers became involved to identify an approach to honouring Elders, one manager suggested that Elders be considered as “consultants” and yet another administrative colleague responded that according to some *other* policies all contracts of that nature were to be *tendered*. A tender process in our university calls for a public call for proposals. We imagined the worst possibility of posting a position for an Elder to run a sweat. We were mortified by this offensive suggestion, and yet the managers thought this to be a viable solution. Dr. Sasakamoose implored the managers to respect that Elder knowledge was not a commodity; their wisdom could not be commodified for the purposes of posting a notice of tender. While the managers slowly came to understand that we would never allow Elder teachings to be tendered, we realized that we had a long way yet to go to address the levels of ignorance concerning Indigenous knowledge and pedagogical practice. The issue of how best to honour Elders remains unresolved. At this point, Dr. Pete has extended an invitation to some of the other senior Indigenization leads at other universities to share our responses to this matter.

A Feast is a Ceremony

Prayer, often in the form of pipe ceremony and smudging, precedes a feast. Dr. Sasakamoose explains, “Smudging is the burning of sweetgrass or other medicines to eliminate negativity and is done when in prayer” (Personal communication, April 8, 2013). Throughout the planning process, Dr. Sasakamoose counteracted the difficulties of the potluck policy and the limitations of the compensation procedures through the practice of smudging. As she was expecting her first baby, she smudged to offer her baby some protection from the difficult circumstances around her. Even with her commitment to

participating in ceremonial practices, she often felt guilty or sneaky as if smudging in her office at the university was wrong. She explains:

The university had no direct or well-thought out smudging policy. In fact, I had been smudging in my office on a daily basis, but did so with an element of guilt and concern that I was doing something I shouldn't be. (Personal communication, April 5, 2013.)

At the time that planning for the round dance and feast was being considered, the university secretary was going through a formal process of policy reform. Our timing to address the need for policy reform was perfect. As we began our review of the smudging policy, we could not help but to laugh; we both were in violation of the policy as it was written. We had both been smudging in our individual offices when, in fact, we were supposed to go to the Aboriginal Student Centre and ask staff there to “facilitate a smudge” on our behalf in the Elders Office. This policy had to change (University of Regina smudging policy, 2010).

Dr. Sasakamoose offered tobacco to an Elder to join her for a meeting that was scheduled with some of the managers. There only agenda item was the smudging and pipe ceremony policy. Dr. Sasakamoose introduced the Elder to the managers. As the Elder began to address the managers and discuss the role and purpose of smudging, he was cut off by one of them who implored, “We know about smudging” and proceeded to steer the discussion back to the agenda. Dr. Sasakamoose was mortified, her attempts to address what, in her view, was a lack of understanding was rejected by this manager. This insult led to a breakdown in communications that was only taken up again a few months later with a different manager.

Like the smudging policy, the pipe ceremony policy originally called for the smudge to be facilitated through the Aboriginal Student Centre. Stated in that way, holding the pipe ceremony to begin the feast and round dance in a location other than the ASC would have resulted in a violation of policy; a violation that Dr. Sasakamoose wanted to avoid. The ASC's location was not a large enough space for what was anticipated to be a very large community event. Therefore, the policy needed to be revised to allow for pipe ceremonies to be held in other locations on campus. Discussions to reform the pipe ceremony and smudging policy engaged staff from the Aboriginal Advisory Circle, Facilities Management, Student Affairs, and the Executive Lead: Indigenization and others as deemed necessary.

In the end, our recommendations to allow for personal smudging in offices and smudging in classrooms as a part of academic Indigenization were included in the revised policy. We have now communicated throughout the university that when staff members wish to smudge, they should post a sign on their door that states, “Smudging happens here”. Staff are advised that they should inform their neighbours and they should keep their door closed. For faculty who want to engage their learners in a smudge, the same procedure applies. While not perfect, this new procedure allows staff to partake in

these ceremonies with less fear. Along the way we have offered our colleagues and students the opportunity to join us in the sharing of the ceremony. By doing so, we work towards addressing the lack of knowledge of some of our colleagues and students and help them to acquire greater levels of cultural competency.

The language of policy: Issues of non-compliance

As the authors became more involved in the policy reform process, we could not help but comment how punitive the language of policy can be. For example, the wording of ‘non-compliance’ could not be understood as anything but punitive. In the original smudging and pipe ceremony policy the ‘consequence of non-compliance’ read, “Failure to comply with this policy may result in an interruption to the ceremony and/or occupational health and safety risks to the University community” (University of Regina, Smudging Policy, 2010). Our response to the first reading of this consequence was, once again, exasperation at the levels of ignorance regarding the cultural protocols related to the pipe ceremony. You just do not interrupt the pipe ceremony once it has started. There are teachings associated with the assembly and dismantling of the pipe that must be adhered to. As we began to communicate our feelings about this particular statement of non-compliance, our colleagues came to understand why we were offended. Together, we re-wrote the statement to better articulate: should the smoke alarm go off because of a failure to inform Facilities Management (who could then monitor and disarm the alarm system) that we were holding a pipe ceremony, a resulting evacuation could disrupt the ceremony. While not perfect, it made the consequence of non-compliance less punitive.

Since these new policies have been in place, a new irony emerged. Winter semester Dr. Sasakamoose was teaching a course on Multicultural Healing. She had invited an Elder to provide support and teachings to her students. She moved her class to the ASC classroom for this experience. Prior to the new smudging policy this was one of the only allowable smudging locations; therefore, Dr. Sasakamoose did not inform facilities management. Shortly after the Elder opened with a smudge, University security knocked on the door. Dr. Sasakamoose opened the door and was greeted by a security guard who inquired as to what was being burned. Dr. Sasakamoose explained that they were smudging and that she was under the impression this room was an allowable location. The non-Indigenous guard indicated that he was familiar with the smell of smudge and that did not think it was the same thing. Dr. Sasakamoose asked the guard to tell her what she needed to do. He took down her contact information and indicated that the head of security would contact her the next day. The next morning, Dr. Sasakamoose received an email from security with the electronic link to the university policy on smudging (of which she co-authored). If one reads the policy it clearly indicates Dr. Sasakamoose was not in violation as she used an ASC classroom. Clearly, even with a written policy, training, and in-

services provided by the lead of Indigenization, if our own security is unaware of the policies as they are being Indigenized, we will be fighting the politics of distraction for a long time ahead.

Indigenizing University Policy

The original intention to hold a feast and round dance was guided by Dr. Sasakamoose's commitment to *bimadiziwin*. We agree that doing things in a good way will include working with elders and engaging in ceremony. We both understand and respect that when we undertake our work in this manner, we are often blessed with success. Yet, we continue to be reminded that doing things in a good way is not always easy when working within western institutions.

The organizational norms for catering, policy, facilities management, human resource, and university finance all offered challenges, which we believe were rooted in the high levels of ignorance that operate in the academy. Throughout the policy reform process, we were often distracted from that work by the emerging need to educate our colleagues about culturally responsive practices in support of greater levels of Indigenization. We responded to curiosity, ignorance, and racial bias along the way in our dealings with university colleagues. Dr. Pete understands these obligations to teach as necessary steps in the change process, and not just a form of "busy work" implied by Smith (2002). She understands that in this province people have been structurally denied the opportunity to learn about Indigenous ways and histories: they simply do not know. Dr. Pete has been working towards building a shared understanding of Indigenization in order to build a shared responsibility for Indigenization at our university. These policy reforms offered us plenty of opportunity to build greater levels of understanding. Our hope is that other individuals engaged in leadership aimed at university Indigenization can take from our story to aid in their own change process. *We humbly offer you our story in the hope it will provide support for the work you do.*

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