

# KNOWING COMMUNITY THROUGH STORY: IT'S WHERE WE COME TOGETHER

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*As PhD students and sessional lecturers, we undertook a collaborative narrative study\* to explore our pedagogical and curricular approaches to decolonizing a community development course offered in our College of Education. We gathered our conversations, reflective journals, and notes, then wove together the narratives thematically using a métissage research methodology. We discovered ways we come together in the spaces in-between our different experiences, backgrounds, and worldviews, as Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, decolonizing our curriculum and our students' classroom experience. This paper shares one of the thematic braids we created, focused on the use of story for research, story as pedagogy and story for building relationships. We encourage educators to consider bridging their worldviews with other ways of seeing and knowing, to work toward decolonizing their teaching practices using story, and to form relationships across differences using story.*

We are fellow doctoral students and friends who teach as sessional lecturers at a Canadian prairie university in its College of Education, primarily in the Department of Educational Administration. As non-Indigenous and Indigenous educators, we consider decolonization is “a process that belongs to everyone” (Bouvier, 2013, p. 9), a belief that has profound implications for what, why, and how we teach. Our responsibility is to ensure that our students have accurate information about First Nations, Métis, and Inuit Peoples, honouring their histories, rich cultures, issues, and contributions across curriculum, teaching practices, and relationships. For our study, we took up a métissage research methodology (Lowan-Trudeau, 2015; Scott, 2021) as a resistance against mainstream methodologies, and as move to use both Indigenous and Western narrative approaches. We used story for research, story as pedagogy and story for relationship building. This paper gives a snapshot of our study.

## Context

Our University Plan 2025, *nīkānītān manācihitowinihk* (Cree) and *ni manachīhitoonaan* (Michif) translates as "Let us lead with respect" and prioritizes transformative decolonization leading to reconciliation. Indigenous the university through decolonizing its structures, policies, and practices is necessary at all levels of the university (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018) and the classroom is a fundamental space to be transformed (Cote-Meek, 2014). Decolonization requires a comprehensive approach, a “trans-systemic analysis and methods of reaching beyond two

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distinct systems of knowledge [Indigenous and Eurocentric] to create fair and just educational systems and experiences” (Battiste, 2013, p. 100). In reconsidering what counts as knowledge and pedagogy, we can create classrooms and curricula where we include and therefore legitimize and value diversity (Mihesuah, & Wilson, 2004), and we must do so in relationship with Indigenous communities (Sammel & Segura, 2020). Indigenization done in a good way should support Indigenous students and integrate Indigenous worldviews, perspectives, and knowledge into Western curricula alongside changes to institutional structures (University of Saskatchewan, 2018). Indigenous faculty at University of Saskatchewan (USask) emphasized Treaty, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s *Calls to Action* (2015), land rights, and transformative education’s role in self-determination as requisite elements in indigenization of the academy (USask, 2018).

We typically teach graduate students in the College of Education, who are a mix of school-based administrators, teacher leaders, and higher education staff ranging from early to mid-career professionals, both domestic (urban, rural, and remote), and international. During the university campus closure with COVID, courses were online with synchronous elements, introducing the added challenge of building a class community remotely. Most international students attended synchronous sessions from abroad and had not yet travelled to or lived in Canada. Non-Indigenous domestic students say exposure to First Nations and Métis history, culture, and perspectives during their undergraduate degree was very limited or non-existent. International students, almost without exception, were unaware of Canada’s colonial history.

### **Situating Ourselves**

*Terrance:* My story or point of view is Indigenous, influenced by colonized experiences from Indian Affairs’ bureaucracy and the Catholic Church. I am a Residential School Survivor, a teacher, a consultant, and a former chief of Cowessess First Nation. My worldview is opposite to the colonized perspective. We do not have the same constitutional rights as citizens, such as equality – a political right conferred by the state. The colonial narrative is told without reference to Indigenous people; however, Indigenous people cannot tell their stories without reference to the colonization of Canada. An instructor or storyteller’s point of view influences where they point the sight of the student into the context of the historical narrative. Why does point of view matter so much? Because it filters everything in your story; everything comes from a certain point of view.

When teaching students about Indigenous Nations as a part of Canada’s history, storytelling is a process of reclaiming the story to *own the story*, rather than be defined or storied by others. Colonizers have historically told and shaped the stories of Indigenous peoples. Teachers facilitate the process of stories, shape new narratives based on their sense of culture. Storytelling, in this way is a cultural and political act (Chan, 2021). It can be a method of decolonization and reconciliation.

*Roberta:* I am an educator, counselor, and administrator from Treaty 6 Territory and the Homeland of the Métis, a Settler Canadian (Battell & Barker, 2015) whose family emigrated from Scotland four generations ago; I am also the mother of two Métis sons. As I am complicit in colonialism by my ancestry and education, I am responsible for decolonizing my mind, heart, and spirit and thereby my teaching, for my children, my future grandchildren, and the province’s children and youth. I continue to unlearn, relearn, and reframe my teaching approaches and the content of my courses to affirm the relevance of Indigenous knowledge (Dei, 2011), strive to

create a just and balanced curriculum, and build class communities of connectedness, awareness, and growth. Change requires disrupting colonial systems of dominance in education, particularly to support school leaders advance this necessary work. I, like my colleague, value story as a pedagogical tool.

### **Methodology and Methods**

Curriculum theorists, Chambers et al. (2008) popularized *métissage* as a “linguistic artifact, a theoretical construct, a literary strategy and a research praxis” (p. 141). *Métissage* weaves together autobiographical writings, reflections, and/or conversations of the researchers and/or participants to create a narrative tapestry that reveals and affirms differences. The approach promotes understanding of individual perspectives (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009) and encourages the challenging of assumptions (Cox et al., 2017). Lowan-Trudeau (2015), a Métis scholar and educator, used *métissage* as a methodology to combine both Indigenous and Western narrative traditions in exploring people’s experiences and perspectives around ecological knowledge systems. Cox et al. (2017) employed the methodology to frame their experiences as instructors and students in a critical pedagogy course. Most recently, Scott (2021) utilized *métissage* as a methodology in her exploration of how university courses have impacted Métis peoples’ understanding of their identities. As a collaborative narrative methodology, it allows for critical exploration and insights into what we learn and how we learn from each other. *Métissage* invites engagement and exchanges to discover threads of relationality, traced through multiple and mixed identities from sharing of stories, histories, perspectives, and understandings, written or oral (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009). The methods used within *métissage* bear similarities to Indigenous methods of narrative storywork, conversation, and reflection. While *métissage* is a research methodology, its praxis creates space for critical pedagogical exploration, and the resulting narrative becomes a new literary artifact with the power to “get us a heart of wisdom” (Hasebe-Ludt & Jordan, 2010, p. 2).

Our use of *métissage* involved multiple iterations of discovering and braiding themes drawn from our artifacts: recorded conversations, reflections, email exchanges, and notes about why, what, and how we teach a community development leadership course. When sifting through the artifacts, we could see how often we looped back to story – how we use story, why it is important to tell our stories and to hear others’ stories. As we assembled our work into a meaningful collection, we settled on braiding sets of narratives from three threads, each set ultimately addressing a larger question.

While learning more about each other’s backgrounds, worldviews, beliefs, values, and our pedagogies, curricular decisions, and student interactions, we saw how our stories come together, yet are distinguishable as individual threads by their variance, with essential elements of the whole, bi-directionally reinforcing each other. This is the beauty and value of the *métissage*, the weaving together of stories. We look to stories as truth telling, and a method long used for Indigenous self-determination (Corntassel, 2009; Smith, 1999).

## A Braid Created

By interlacing our threads of storied conversations and reflections on differing worldviews, classroom community creation, and knowledge building, we saw a pedagogical question forming. The three threads below explore how we decolonize our classrooms through specific pedagogy and curriculum choices to address, “How can we share differing worldviews to create an open and healthy community of learners who can build knowledge together?”

### Thread One: Sharing Differing Worldviews

*Terrance:* A Settler friend I met through the community ‘Buy and Sell’ Facebook group. From his perspective as an educator and farmer, he stated, “We are all land-based people.” My friend’s community history began in Scandinavia, and their reasons for immigration came at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. His family, one of the original Settler families in the area, began farming at about the same time as my ancestors did on our nearby reserve. He explored his local history by asking, “Who are the people that the streets are named after?” Although separated by many things, we realized in conversation and by sharing our stories, we are both fixed to this same space, this land, through the same period, by a common thread. Our ancestors were bound by the same ethic of toil and hardships. Our stories are different yet connected.

The storied mosaic on the North American Plains shifted from an Indigenous framework to a patchwork of ethnic communities, separated by language, customs, and religions, but all sharing a common vision and goals for their communities. The goal then as educators, is to solicit these local stories, through our local educational institutions (curriculum), to understand our neighbourhood and the people in them. In a larger sense, as human beings, we are not that different, and we have interesting stories to tell.

*Roberta:* Leroy Little Bear (2000) said, “No matter how dominant a worldview is, there are always other ways of interpreting the world” (p. 77). I openly acknowledge my position of power with students as an instructor in a system that produces and reproduces devaluing of Indigenous Peoples, knowledges, and traditions. We can upend persistent dominance of Western worldviews in a higher education classroom, starting on the first day of class by centering story. We need to tell our stories differently to move forward in a good way and invite students to do the same.

When I first meet students, I begin by situating myself (territory, family, professional background) and then share a story about growing up or beginning teaching (sometimes a serious one, sometimes a funny, self-deprecating one). I want them to know I am on a journey of reconciliation and have not always been the person they see today. In presenting myself as a human being who looks forward to learning alongside them, I invite them to consider that our community of diverse worldviews gives us an opportunity for ‘cultural interface’ (Nakata, 2007). Our space with its different “systems of thought, competing and contesting discourses within and between different knowledge traditions, and different systems of social, economic and political organization” (Nakata, 2007, p. 199) requires an ethics of dialogue to begin our storytelling.

### Thread Two: Creating an Open and Healthy Community of Learners

*Roberta:* Being welcoming and engaging with students helps them to feel a sense of belonging to the community. During online delivery when the classes were hybrid (online study combined with Zoom sessions), I met with each student individually in the first week of class. Their feedback about connecting early with them was overwhelmingly positive. In our first

session, as always, we built a community agreement of how we would be with each other, a living document, linked to discussion boards. However, influenced by my conversations with Terrance, I have shifted from working to create ‘safe’ spaces to ‘brave spaces’ (Arao & Clemens, 2013) and am more insistent on students accepting discomfort as a condition for growth (Sensoy and DiAngelo, 2014).

Students say one of the most powerful methods of bringing them together is a talking circle with agreed-upon protocols of respect, full attention, and active listening. The circle works both in the classroom and online, although differently. We witness the community drawing closer together with each passing week. People become more willing to ask questions, bring up difficult issues, and share their experiences and stories. In their stories, they reveal who they are, where they came from, and what they know and believe. As King (2003) said, “the truth about stories is, that’s all that we are.” Their stories serve to build the classroom community and help them to think about their role in their communities, then what they might propose for a community development project.

*Terrance:* I start my class by discussing ‘ethical space’ with students, the arena for discussion among people with diverse worldviews – what Elder Willie Ermine (2007) called the ‘ethical space of engagement.’ It is the space where all actors display no prejudice, preconceived ideas, hierarchy, or any other means of promoting inequality or inferiority. Ethnicity, nationality, religion, and political beliefs are prominent elements that form our worldviews. The ethical space of engagement proposes a space for examining diversity in human communities. It is the positioning of diverse societies in the pursuit of a relevant discussion to create new currents of thought that flow in different directions. Those new ideas displace Western means of interaction and thought. If we transgress on these standards, “our actions may also infringe or violate the spaces of others, so as to stifle creativity and growth” (Ermine, 2007, p. 196). I insist on maintaining the ethical space. Some students have entrenched beliefs stemming from generations past. They must allow their beliefs to be questioned or they risk not learning. One student refused to consider Indigenous worldviews until they understood Indigenous ceremony and storytelling was a means of reinforcing ethical behavior, much the same as Christian ceremony and stories reinforces ethical behavior. Once understood, their assignment then outlined the meaning of the Sundance ceremony and the teepee pole teachings. In that sense, Indigenous beliefs and Western Christian beliefs carry out a similar purpose in guiding ethical thinking.

Students are not the only ones who push back. Some academics still do not accept Indigenous Ways of Knowing as valid knowledge, much less as an academic field of study. Although it is critical for me as an Indigenous scholar to thoroughly understand Indigenous Research Methods and Western philosophical viewpoints and research frameworks, the reverse is not practiced by all of my non-Indigenous counterparts. Our University Plan 2025 states, "The world needs a university in which Indigenous concepts, methodologies, pedagogies, languages, and philosophies are respectfully woven into the tapestry of learning, research, scholarship, creativity, and community engagement" (USask, 2018). The mandate is clear; however, it will take time for people to realize the strengths of integrating Indigenous Ways.

### **Thread Three: Building Knowledge Together**

*Terrance:* Canada's rapidly changing ethnic mosaic requires educational institutions to address diversity in the classroom. This is especially important for the academy but also for many schools in smaller prairie communities. To combat prejudice, it is both a challenge and opportunity to structure diverse classrooms not only for learning, but to develop greater tolerance

and confidence in environments with foreign cultures present. It helps students learn about other languages and cultures and develops sensitivity and understanding. It gives broader understanding and opens our minds to deeper insights and further inquiry. Diverse classrooms help develop critical thinking and problem-solving skills related to real-world problems.

Ultimately, these young people must build their communities together. Construction of stories and telling of stories provide a format for individuals to situate themselves within the continuing and evolving story of Canada. Where did you come from and why? Why did you choose this location in Canada? Who were the people who made up your historic Settler community, or the modern community you left? What are your customs for gift giving, for celebrations, for grief? This storying approach requires work with artifact, place, and context in the hope that a story will emerge that needs to be told.

Diversity among faculty is just as important as it is among students. All educational institutions are hiring teachers from a range of backgrounds who bring different worldviews. Faculty can endeavor to structure their learning spaces and lessons to reflect differences among students. Students will identify with teachers who promote culturally relevant lesson planning. Faculty can highlight the importance of academic performance and foster cross-cultural understanding and competence. In the end, the diversity of instructors may promote activism and political analysis that contributes to building a more tolerant Canadian society.

*Roberta:* Before my students start envisioning themselves as a leader in their community's development and investigating from a strengths-based approach what their community might want to change, they take the 4 Seasons of Reconciliation, an online course developed by the First Nations University of Canada. Participants learn about Indigenous Peoples' diverse cultures, beliefs, histories, issues, and contributions on Turtle Island – and how they can be part of reconciliation in Canada.

Taking the course serves multiple purposes. It centres the importance of both knowing about the people who agreed to share their lands with Settlers in Treaty and the significance of Indigenous Peoples as First People. It indicates to students they must be aware of the multiple histories in their communities before considering any kind of development, and it gives them common ground on which to start conversations with each other. International students from colonized nations are horrified and saddened to have their image marred of a polite and kind Canada after learning about broken treaties, residential schools, assimilation, and genocide of Indigenous People of Turtle Island. However, the students are grateful to know the truth. Then the stories we tell in our talking circle about ourselves and community development, take on a different tone and a deeper meaning.

## Conclusion

Our study aimed to explore our pedagogy and specifically, our curricular decisions in community development courses for teacher-leaders using *métissage* as a research methodology. We learned from each other how our pedagogy and curriculum is intentionally decolonized and why Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars and educators must strive to work together. Our ethical relationality as Indigenous and non-Indigenous researcher-educators is illustrated through one of the braids of discovery. Despite our very different life experiences, education, and cultural backgrounds, we share similar approaches to curriculum, and we respect where we diverge in worldview and practice. We encourage scholar educators to engage with colleagues in critical

reflection of past and current pedagogical and curricular practices while strengthening relationships to build alliances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.

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