

Holistic Approaches to Life and Living: A Curricular and Pedagogical Inquiry

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Abstract

This graduate course will conduct a respectful and creative inquiry into the significance of the holistic Cree concepts of wicihitowin (good relations) and wahkohtowin (extended kinship relations) in guiding us to imagine more ethically relational ways of living and thinking. Through participation in collaborative practices, we will work together, on and off campus, inside and outside, engaging in seasonal and land-based learning to deepen our understandings of the pedagogical possibilities that these holistic approaches provide. How can these commitments to ethical relationality guide us to shift our understandings of life, living, and the responsibilities of scholarship today? Working closely with an Elder, students will combine creative and conventional scholarly research practices with experiential learning and with opportunities to engage in holism as a sacred ecology wisdom teaching as they are led in ceremonial and spiritual practices which provide connections to these insights.

Project Description

Context and Background: In the past decade, Canadians have realized that they were given an incomplete understanding of the complex history of their nation and nationality. The particularities of the experiences of Indigenous peoples and communities as *subjects* of the Canadian nation are being revealed to the Canadian citizenry in detailed ways that trouble the story of Canada as it has been told in schools for generations. The most prominent and insidious example of this troubling are Indian residential schools and the multigenerational violences perpetrated on children by church and government officials. Details of this history have been made public knowledge through the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada on Indian Residential Schools. In the past few months, the leaders of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission have issued a *Final Report* (2015a) and also 94 *Calls to Action* (2015b) “[i]n order to redress the legacy of residential schools and advance the process of Canadian reconciliation” (p. 1). The *Calls to Action* are unified by a commitment to improving the relationships between Indigenous people and Canadians, and instigating sustained social and political change. Many of these *Calls to Action* specifically call on educational institutions to act as critical leaders in facilitating change and providing meaningful educational opportunities for people to enact reconciliation. At the request of President David Turpin and under the guidance of Deputy Provost Wendy Rodgers, Faculty and staff at the University of Alberta have begun meetings to discuss how they might respond to the *Calls to Action*.

The spirit and intent of the *Calls to Action* guides us as researchers to understand that meaningful reconciliation efforts for prominent postsecondary institutions like the University of

Alberta must go beyond simple recruitment of Indigenous professors and students. We understand these *Calls to Action* as well-aligned with both the *Dare to Discover* (2009) and *Dare to Deliver* (2011) documents in guiding our work at the University of Alberta to “create exceptional and life-changing university experiences for students” which also providing opportunities for people to engage with Indigenous worldviews and experience the world differently (*Dare to Discover*). These goals continue to be priorities for President Turpin. Such work requires a deep commitment to repair the relationships—human and more-than-human—that have been under attack as a result of colonial logics and promote new ways of living together that are not fully circumscribed by colonial paradigms (Donald, 2009; 2011; 2012).

The Proposed TLEF Project: This proposed project is inspired and guided by Elder Bob Cardinal of the Enoch Cree Nation. Elder Cardinal is well-known in the Treaty 6 territory as a spiritual and ceremonial leader who is frequently called upon to provide guidance to diverse groups of people on how to live well and in holistic balance with others. In sharing such teachings, Elder Cardinal draws on wisdom traditions and insights as they were taught to him by his Elders. Drs. Donald (a descendent of the amiskwaciyiniwak, Papaschase Cree, and an associate professor in Secondary Education) and Stewart (English and Irish descent, an associate professor in English and Film Studies, and Director of the Creative Writing Programme) have close personal relationships with Elder Cardinal and, over the past several years, have come to rely on his guidance in providing meaningful teaching and learning opportunities for the students enrolled in their classes in both the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Arts. In Fall Term 2014, Dr. Donald and Elder/Assistant Adjunct Professor Cardinal together offered EDSE 501/601 Holistic Approaches to Learning to graduate students in the Faculty of Education. Dr. Stewart audited the course and participated as an assistant. That course was overwhelmingly successful for the students who participated in it and has provided the impetus for this proposal.

For this proposed course, Drs. Donald and Stewart will work together with Elder Cardinal to offer the course to graduate students in both the Faculty of Education and the Faculty of Arts. Our working team will include the Elder, the students, the land, the various entities that we depend upon for our survival, and the seasons. We will consider the depth and breadth of our relations and begin by demonstrating our commitment to the Truth and Reconciliation *Calls to Action* that challenges us to “repudiate concepts that seek to justify European sovereignty”—such as *terra nullius* and the Doctrine of Discovery, and to “renew Treaty relationships based on principles of mutual recognition, mutual respect and shared responsibility for maintaining those relationships into the future” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015b). The six-credit course will begin in Fall 2016 and end in Summer 2017. The intention of the course is to engage with the wisdom teachings of holism for the duration of the four-season cycle which shapes and characterizes the patterns of life and living that have been followed in the northern plains region for millennia. The unique character of the course is that it will combine creative scholarly explorations on the significance of holism with opportunities to engage in ceremonial and spiritual practices led by the Elder.

Class Description: The class will take place at Elder Cardinal’s ceremonial grounds on the Enoch Cree Nation in a meeting facility that is without running water, electricity or central heating. The group will spend a considerable amount of time outside, consulting with Elders, and will occasionally visit significant sacred sites in the region. We will meet three times in 6 hour sessions in each of the four seasons. Thus, the total class time per season will be eighteen hours. This full time frame of the course spans the waxing and waning of thirteen moons, and allows us to fully engage with the holistic and land-based focus of the class. For a typical 6 hour session,

we will begin with smudging and a sharing circle. We will discuss assigned readings and engage in writing exercises and activities that enhance understanding of the readings. We will then participate in an outside activity that connects with the readings. Outside activities will include observational walkabouts, the ecological study of particular places, the gathering of plants for ceremony, and story-telling. The class will consist of four groups, and each group will be responsible for closely observing one particular season within the context of the teachings and creating a final project. With the help of a graduate research assistant, we will use film to document the class, archiving the value and meaning of holistic wisdom teachings to the participants. Additionally, we will be collecting and analyzing data from the class research and student interviews (conducted in accordance with the Research Ethics Guidelines) to inform our understandings of the meaning and significance of the course process to the participants. Our findings will result in a conference presentation and an academic paper.

Holistic Approaches to Life and Living as Curriculum and Pedagogy: A Critical Shift:

As noted previously, Canadian universities have been challenged in recent times to engage with Indigenous themes, experiences, and worldviews at an institutional level. It is our observation that the possibilities for sustained and meaningful engagement with Indigenous themes and experiences at the postsecondary level are severely constrained by institutional conventions. The key point here is that most postsecondary institutions are agreeable to consideration of Indigenous curriculum and pedagogy as long as these approaches conform to institutional conventions and align with the well-established citizenship goals of the Canadian nation and nationality. Indigenous philosophies are usually not engaged with on their own terms, but are instead filtered through a Eurocentric lens. This habit of marginalizing Indigenous subjectivities and experiences is the result of a long-term educational program dedicated to telling a story of the Canadian nation and nationality that usually only included mention of Indians as unfortunate remnants from a time before civilization arrived in an empty land (Donald, 2009; Willinsky, 1998; Clark, 2007).

As part of an ongoing effort to articulate new ways of living together that are not fully circumscribed by colonial frontier logics (Donald 2009; 2011; 2012), we have been increasingly inspired by the holistic wisdom teachings of Elders. This concept of holism is guided by four directions teachings which emphasize balance of the physical, emotional, spiritual, and mental aspects of the human being as key to living a good life. The Cree wisdom concepts most intimately connected to holism are wicihitowin and wahkohtowin. Wicihitowin refers to the life-giving energy that is generated when people face each other as relatives and build trustful relationships by connecting with others in respectful ways. In doing so, we demonstrate that we recognize each other as fellow human beings and work hard to put respect and love at the forefront of our interactions. The Elders teach that when wicihitowin is enacted in these ways—with the true spirit and intent of what it evokes—there is much good that flows from it. Wahkohtowin refers to kinship relations and teaches us to extend our relational network in four directions so that it also includes the more-than-human beings that live amongst us. Doing so helps us remain mindful that we human beings are fully enmeshed in a series of relationships that enable us to live as we do. Thus, following the holistic relational wisdom of wahkohtowin, we are called to repeatedly acknowledge and honour the fact that the sun, the land, the wind, the water, the animals, and the trees (just to name a few) are quite literally our relatives; we carry parts of each of them inside our own bodies. We are fully reliant on them for our survival and so the wise person works to ensure that those more-than-human relatives are kept healthy and treated with the deep respect that they deserve.

Taken together, wicihitowin and wahkohtowin can be understood as promoting holism through ethical relationality. Ethical relationality is an ecological understanding of organic connectivity that becomes readily apparent to us as human beings when we honour the sacred ecology that supports all life and living. The main insight that flows from these Cree wisdom teachings of holism is that a purely human understanding of ethical relationality is a significantly impoverished version of those teachings in that it disregards our complex connectivity to sacred ecology. It is an ethical imperative to remember that we as human beings live in the world together and also alongside our more-than-human relatives; we are called to constantly think and act with reference to those relationships. Ethical relationality does not deny difference nor does it promote the assimilation of it. Rather, ethical relationality supports the conceptualization of difference in ecological terms as necessary for life and living to continue.

Conceptualized in these terms and with these specific commitments, holism comes to be understood as much more than just another new-age intellectual experiment. It is a old-age life practice that carefully attends to the principles of cyclicity, reciprocity, and balance. It is our view that such wisdom is urgently needed in postsecondary educational settings today. The main reason for this is that most students that we encounter in our classes feel trapped in a North American settler dream imaginary that guides them to value the market and accept the exploitation of resources as necessary for them to live well today. This course innovatively expands the realm of teaching and learning at the University of Alberta, *because* its founding principles are sacred ecology teachings of holism that provide guidance on how to live otherwise. The course's central focus is uniquely suited to draw students into a fundamentally different and essential way of perceiving, existing with, and honouring the world. There are no courses of its kind available to students at the University of Alberta. Based on our understandings of the true spirit and intent of Treaties, these teachings are an inheritance to all people who have come to live in the Treaty 6 territory and must be shared if we expect people to live in more ethically relational ways.

Collaboration: This collaboration will provide a unique opportunity for course participants to engage in holism as a life practice and connect holistic wisdom teachings to their own lives and studies. Collaborative work challenges the single researcher enlightenment model of scholarship that is prevalent in most universities (Tsing, 2003), and it is in keeping with the holistic nature of our course. Combining creative scholarly explorations with opportunities to engage in ceremonial and spiritual practices led by Elder Cardinal and Donald's knowledge of Indigenous philosophies and pedagogical practices will expand and enhance our understandings of curriculum and pedagogy. Stewart's experience in creative research will facilitate opportunities for the students to conduct and share their research in formal ways that are materially and ethically consistent with the challenging content (Bernstein, 2013; Hejinian, 2000).

Sustainability: Integrating theory with real lived experience and interconnecting communities who are often adversely isolated from each other, this project embodies the essential critical shift required in universities today. Centralizing Indigenous perspectives, such as land-based education and Indigenous resurgence is essential to decolonization (Coulthard, 2014; Wildcat et al, 2015), and we will provide a model for creating such sustained and essential improvements in postsecondary educational outcomes. We anticipate much interest in this class due to the opening of the new Maskwa House of Learning on campus, the many ongoing university initiatives in response to the Truth and Reconciliation *Calls to Action*, increasing interest in cross-campus collaborations and recent initiatives from the Governments of Canada and Alberta that highlight the need for better relationships between Canadians and Indigenous communities.

In addition, in a climate of concern over enrolments in the Arts, our experience with land-based and mixed community education demonstrates that class enrolment soars. Furthermore, as students become increasingly intent on relevant research and appropriately designed research methodologies, collaborative and creative research methods are considered valid and necessary (Smith, 2015). Given the course's relevance and innovation, we anticipate that it will be of interest to a sizable population of students, and that it will lay the groundwork for further crucial land-based initiatives. Most importantly, this course is founded on Indigenous principles, and provides a much needed model for future initiatives that could (and should) be structured in consultation with the Faculty of Education's Indigenous Education Council and reach out to all faculties--from Science to Engineering, from Medicine to the Arts.

Dissemination: A final public symposium will take place in September, 2017 at Elk Island National Park, including the premiere of the film documentary, student work and a feast. Additionally, each season a public student-run presentation and discussion will be hosted to share insights from the student's research process. All events will be highly publicized. The symposium and the presentations will focus on course processes, the experiences of the students, and the ways in which a change in context and focus—while working under the guidance of an Elder— can facilitate significant transformations in how people imagine themselves as human beings *and* in relation to the more-than-human world. We will present our own research findings at the Canadian Society for the Study of Education (CSSE) annual conference and the World Indigenous People's Conference on Education (WIPCE) 2017, submitting our most important conclusions for publication in the journal, *Decolonization, Indigeneity, and Society*.

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