

Indigenous Theatre for Knowledge and Change

Jane Heather

Reconciliation is about stories and our ability to tell stories. I think the intellectual part of ourselves wants to start looking for words to define reconciliation. And then there is the heart knowledge that comes from our life experiences. It's challenging to connect the two and relate it to reconciliation.... I'm reminded about the power of story.... It's far more powerful to have Aboriginal peoples talk about the impact of assimilation and hope for reconciliation than having words written down in a report.

Lorena Fontaine, TRC p. 293 Prairie Women's Health Centre of Excellence, "Nitâpwewinân" 14-16.

Intention

In December 2015 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission on Indian Residential Schools (TRC) issued its report and 94 calls to action urging all levels of government (civic, Provincial, Federal and Indigenous) to work together to repair some of the damage done by colonization to Indigenous people and to begin to move towards reconciliation. Several of the actions are specifically directed to post secondary as recognized by President Turpin and the new strategic plan for the U of A. (section Build, strategy ii, and objective 4) Working with Indigenous artists, scholars and community members I have begun to develop a course to be offered in the Department of Drama that will engage students in concrete responses to the TRC Calls to Action. Students will examine Indigenous theatre in Canada as a frame for "building student capacity for intercultural understanding empathy and mutual respect" (action 63.iii) and "Developing culturally appropriate curricula (action 10.iii)

Although many Indigenous people reject the word Reconciliation it may be possible to use it as the Commission does

(reconciliation) is about coming to terms with events of the past in a manner that overcomes conflict and establishes a respectful and healthy relationship among people, going forward.

The commission has a clear idea of how that needs to happen as well

... there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour

Students need opportunities to learn about Indigenous people, historical and contemporary contexts and how Indigenous arts contribute to the (re)conciliation project. Indigenous theatre and the arts are a response to colonization. The plays, theatre companies and artists that students will come to know through this proposed course are all working to voice and embody Indigenous culture, lives, dreams, struggles, agonies and triumphs. There are many layers of Indigenous theatre practice and all of them ask audiences to listen, become more educated about our shared history and to take steps towards a more just future.

Theatre has a role to play in unearthing and speaking the stories of the people; the past, the harm, the awareness and can incite action to change behavior. The study of Indigenous theatre in Canada will ask Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to hear and see the stories that can help us see and hear each other. Theatre works to illuminate, to educate to, allow people to be up close and far away at the same time. To feel and think simultaneously to connect the head (the dire and terrible facts) with the heart (the empathy, understanding

and awareness), and can create a meeting ground for students. Without places and spaces to meet and work together we have no hope to imagine a shared future. There is a lot of work to do but theatre has a significant contribution to make.

A reading /survey course would be of great value but theatre can do more. Students in this course will become familiar with plays but also be introduced to theatre making processes. Many of the ways of being in theatre are closely related to ways of being and knowing for many Indigenous cultures. Theatre always begins in the circle, focuses on hearing each voice, is collaborative and collective, holistic and learner centered. It asks us to engage with heart and mind, memory, imagination, relationality, respect, reciprocity. Of the many possible contact points between Indigenous people and post secondary education, theatre may offer something that is not alien and alienating.

Theatre content

Based on many conversations and consultations with Indigenous scholars and artists three possible areas of study have emerged.

Plays and playwrights Students will be introduced to the three Indigenous playwrights and their work and then will choose 3-5 other playwrights to research. Individuals or small groups will research the playwrights, read their plays and prepare a presentation to the rest of the class on what they have discovered. This may involve performing or reading scenes from particular plays. Like any survey course of a particular grouping of theatre, the social, political, economic and cultural context of the work will be explored in order to understand how the theatre arises from and confronts its context.

Theatre companies. As theatre is not a literary art form, students will be introduced to the three significant companies across the country with a focus on the production aspect of the theatre. Individuals or small groups will research other companies, their histories, personnel how the work is developed and produced, the artists involved in production (actors, directors, designers musicians etc.) and develop a presentation for the rest of the class on what they have discovered. As with any examination of theatre companies in drama classes, context will be crucial as will insight into how companies are funded. There are many kinds of Indigenous theatre companies in Canada from large urban-based companies with buildings and programs to small rural groups usually on reserves, working with local people.

The full spectrum of companies and artists will be examined.

Theatre Practice Theatre creation experts (indigenous and non-Indigenous) will be invited to teach theatre-making workshops to students and discuss their work.

Each of these activities will include mixed teaching methods, lecture, demonstration, hands on practice, group and individual research and presentation.

Indigenous history, context/content

In order to help students situate the theatre work they are studying and doing and to grasp something about the country they are living in, four Indigenous scholars and/or Elders will be invited to class to instruct students on key concepts

Context topics

1. Treaty and land rights, where are we, what does it mean to live work and study on Treaty 6 lands?
2. Residential schools an inter generational impact

3. Genocide with a look at language and cultural genocide, particular emphasis on the Indian act and the banning of ceremony, dance and other cultural practices.
4. The TRC and the Calls to action.

It will be important to focus some attention on the ways Indigenous people have survived and thrived, not just on atrocities. I am particularly keen for presentations to include what actions activist (Indigenous and non-Indigenous) have and continue to take to move us all towards justice and the role that artists play in this process.

The Challenges

As calls to ‘indigenize the academy’ sweep this institution and others across the country, many people have written ‘how not to ‘ articles (Daniel Heath Justice, David Garneau, Elina Hill). The list of things to avoid is very long. This list has been edited for space:

1. **Indigenous courses: Indigenous instructors**
 2. **Nothing about us without us**
 3. **Add tipis and stir.**
 4. **Indigenous knowledge, methods, decolonized education.** How do we engage privileged learners to take responsibility for histories and legacies of settler colonialism and make change?
1. **Post-secondary barriers for Indigenous students.**

The Strategies

Some thinking and discussion about strategies to address the challenges include:

1. **Indigenous courses: Indigenous instructors** The department of drama has confirmed a targeted hire of an Indigenous scholar. July 1, 2017, Ken Williams (Cree) will be joining the department and he and I will co teach this new course.
2. **Nothing about us without us.** Since February 2016 my colleague and I, Darlene Auger (Cree) have met with and asked advice of eight academics and twelve theatre artists in Alberta and Saskatchewan.
3. **Add tipis and stir** Indigenizing the academy or the curriculum requires a good deal more than adding a bit about Indigenous people or contexts or issues to the course. Daniel Heath Justice, Canada Research Chair in Indigenous Literature and Expressive Culture University of British Columbia asks these questions

And what about the content? Will complex and challenging issues such as settler-colonialism, land rights, dispossession, racism, genocide, and other confrontational matters make it into the syllabus?,,,Or will it become a watered-down, simplistic affirmation of neoliberal multiculturalism with a Native gloss using easily accessed texts and addressing only the institution's commitments and priorities, not those of the communities themselves?

[20 November 2015](#)

These are important questions about content to which I do not have complete answers yet. It is clear that in order to bring “complex and challenging issues” into the class, so that students have a clear sense of the context and issues that matter to Indigenous communities, a series of at least four sessions will be required. I will need to call on Indigenous experts to speak about these issues.

4. Indigenous knowledge, methods, decolonized education. One of the key reasons to have a co –teacher is to advise and take the lead on these topics. Additionally, I will attend two courses at the U of A, offered by Faculty of Arts professors, to learn more about Indigenous Knowledge and I attended a Masters Class in Banff led by Troy Emory Twigg, artistic director of the Making of Treaty 7 company.

5. Post-secondary barriers for Indigenous students. Both recruitment and retention are issues for Universities. Some work has been done to identify barriers and to develop strategies to remove or mitigate them. This is a partial list from several sources

- Post secondary pedagogy (courses, programs delivery methods) is misaligned with Indigenous Pedagogy which *‘prioritizes learning acquired through cooperation, storytelling, group discussions, modeling and observations.*
- Funding and other financial barriers. Some factors in financial barriers include the fact that poverty and chronic unemployment are generally higher for Indigenous people, many more have young dependent children, and many must move to go to school. Upon arrival in an urban center they may be higher living and child care costs to face in addition to the loss or reduction of family and community support.
- Family and community obligations. Often students must miss class to attend ceremonies, funerals and other community functions.
- Racism from both students and professors
- Isolation and dislocation

Some of these factors are beyond the control of a single course but the design and delivery methods of the course will strive to be more in line with Indigenous pedagogy. To attract and retain more Indigenous students and faculty the academy must do more than paint a gloss, it must rethink course design and delivery and disrupt received notions of expertise and evaluation.

Evaluation

I propose to pilot this course twice, Fall 2017 and Fall 2018. After the first iteration a full evaluation will be conducted and a re design of the course based on the evaluation will be done. Students will also be asked to evaluate the course a several points during the term. An evaluation method and tool will be developed that will be useful to students and instructors.

Impact on Students

Students will be asked for a weekly reflection on impact and other aspects of the course. An assignment will be devised to measure impact, based on a ‘beginning of term, end of term’ knowledge and understanding comparator. A final project will be devised that measures knowledge and application to other situations.

Sustainability

This course requires extra resources; an elder, guest speakers and guest artists. We hope to take students on at least one field trip. If the university decides to mandate an Indigenous course or course credit, this course could provide that. However the extra resources this course demands would require a commitment from the University and perhaps other institutions and funding bodies to be sustainable. This is not a large lecture class and needs to be capped at 20 students. We may discover it can accommodate 30 but no more than that.

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