

Queering Land-Based Education During Covid19

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Abstract

This essay relates the experience and reflects on the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on students and myself (their instructor) as we muddled, plowed, stumbled, stalled, and occasionally sailed our way through *Queering Indigenous Land-Based Education*, a required course for students in the University of Saskatchewan's Master of Education program with an Indigenous Land-Based Education concentration. Ordinarily, the course is presented as a land-based intensive, hosted by an Indigenous Nation. Students and faculty live on-site during the intensives, a context in which they can develop and deepen their relationships with their peers and instructors, and with their most valuable teachers, their Indigenous hosts and the land. This year, the COVID-19 pandemic forced our teaching off the land and into the digital realm. In consultation with other community-based and land-based educators and students, we reconstructed the course's pedagogy and curriculum. This article shares what did and what did not work well in our reconstructed course, and reflects on how what we learned from this experience might inform future pedagogy and practice.

Queering Land Based Education During Covid19

In 2020, the University of Saskatchewan's Department of Education marked the tenth anniversary of its Master program with an Indigenous Land-based Education concentration.¹ The concentration had been developed in response to needs identified by First Nations and other Indigenous communities, who had called for a graduate program for teachers that centred on Indigenous epistemologies, worldviews and ways of teaching and learning, and that offered courses taught in Indigenous communities and in collaboration with local knowledge keepers. The majority of our students are either teachers or administrators in the K-12 system, and the program's design enables them to complete their Master while continuing to work full-time. During the school year, they complete a course online, and, in their regularly scheduled summer and winter breaks, they complete land-based courses in intensive two-week blocks, gathering with their instructor in the Indigenous territory hosting the program that semester. The format has been highly successful. To date, more than 60 students have graduated with their Master of Education degree with this concentration, returning to their home communities prepared to share cultural knowledge and to design and lead land-based programming.

The current cohort includes Indigenous and non-Indigenous students who live (some in sovereign Indigenous nations within the territory of colonial states) in Canada, the United States, and the Kingdom of Hawaii. In the first year of their program, they had completed two land-based courses in Opaskwayak Cree Nation (my home nation in Northern Manitoba), followed by online courses, a study tour in the Kingdom of Hawaii, and two more land-based courses in Chief Dry Geese

¹ To learn more about the Master of Education concentration in Indigenous Land-based Education, visit the webpage <https://education.usask.ca/students/graduate/efdt-cohorts/land-based-indigenous-cohort.php>.

territory of the Yellowknives Dene in the Northwest Territories. The students are also responsible for a Capstone project, which they work on throughout their program. In the final summer, their work includes the course *Queering Indigenous Land-Based Education* and completion of their Capstone project, which students ordinarily work on while canoeing the 250 kilometers from the EB Campbell Dam in Saskatchewan on the Saskatchewan River downstream to Opaskwayak Cree Nation. The final trip is a critical component of the program. It enables the students and professors to be present with and connected to the river and to the land it flows through, and provides a teaching and learning context in which they develop an understanding of our ongoing relationships with and accountability to that river system.

In the summer of 2020, however, rather than canoeing the Saskatchewan River Delta, we were navigating the unfamiliar terrain of the COVID-19 pandemic. It was clear that we would not be able to safely gather with our students on the land, water -- or anywhere, for that matter. Our international students, from Jemez Pueblo, the Kingdom of Hawaii and the United States, would not be able to cross the colonial border. The majority of our students live in Canada, where the nature of the outbreak and government responses have varied widely at provincial, territorial and local levels. Opaskwayak Cree Nation's Chief and Council had responded quickly to the pandemic, declaring a state of emergency, imposing a curfew, and prohibiting travel into or out of Opaskwayak unless it related to medical or other essential services. Other First Nations in the north also set up checkpoints or roadblocks to ensure that only local community members would be able enter or leave their territory. As a result, Opaskwayak, along with all other First Nations in Northern Manitoba and many more throughout Canada, remained COVID-free through the six-month 'first wave' of the pandemic.

We knew, early in the pandemic, that our primary responsibility was to protect both our students and our host community from exposure to the virus, and began to explore ways to present our courses online. The most obvious question that arose was *How can we take a land-based course and make it suitable for online or remote teaching?* The answer to that question was equally obvious. We could not. Land-based education is, at its core, learning from the land. There is no substitute for that experience, and no way to replicate it online. We could, however, search for ways to modify, adjust, accommodate or replace teaching and learning activities we had used in the past to reach or at least approach some of the pedagogical goals of our land-based curriculum. We also knew that, in the context of the pandemic, students were likely negotiating their own professional or personal challenges and stressors. Was their community on lockdown? Were they, too, now working remotely from home? Homeschooling their own children? Caring for a sick family member? Were they able to pay their rent? Put food on the table? These questions have been especially critical for those who live in remote or isolated communities, where there may be little or no access to a grocery store and only limited access to wild foods. The potential psychological impacts of these and other factors associated with the pandemic had to be taken into consideration as we redeveloped our summer courses for online presentation.

We reached out to our colleagues at the Dechinta Center for Research and Learning, an Indigenous-led organization in northern Canada that offers post-secondary land-based programming.² They had planned a webinar series exploring our shared challenge of how to do land-based education in COVID times? Gathering material for the first webinar in the series, a small group discussion was organized with other land-based educators. Discussion topics included ways to queer land-based

² To learn more about Dechinta, visit their website at <https://www.dechinta.ca/about>.

education online, and colleagues shared exercises that would help students think through the concepts we might use. We also discussed the ethics of recording and delivering land-based education online. Participants put forward creative ways to engage students, suggesting activities that were both empowering and potentially transformative for our students, and that would deepen their understanding of why we must and how we can protect the land. The Dechinta team videotaped the discussion. The recordings were edited and made available for use at Dechinta and other schools or universities, including my own.

Our planned summer course would be the second time that I taught *Queering Indigenous Land-Based Education*. I had taught it in the summer of 2018 in a session held in Opaskwayak Cree Nation.³ Hunt and Holmes (2015) define queering as “a deconstructive practice focused on challenging normative knowledges, identities, behaviors, and spaces thereby unsettling power relations and taken-for-granted assumptions” (p. 156). As Indigenous educators, our ‘deconstructive practice’ applies both to what we teach (e.g., unpacking settler-colonial or Eurocentric constructs or understandings) and to how we teach (e.g., moving teaching and learning out of the classroom and onto the land). We also draw on the work of Hawaiian scholar Kalaniopua Young, who describes ‘queering’ as an act of “transforming poison into medicine” (personal communication, January 18, 2019). From that, we understand queering as a ‘reconstructive practice’, one centred on the radical reclamation and reassertion of our “self-as-relationship” (Wilson, 2001, p. 91). This understanding of relationality – a recognition that, as Indigenous people, we are constituted by, and responsible and accountable to our relationships with our ancestors, people here now, and future generations, with the lands, waters, and other living beings;

³ Teaching Assistant Jaylene Murray and I have written about that experience in a chapter in Joshua Russell’s forthcoming book, *Queer EcoPedagogies: Explorations in Sexuality, Nature, and Education*.

with the forces that animate and sustain life, and with the ideas, theories and philosophies that influence our actions - is foundational for Indigenous land-based education.

Our goal, in *Queering Indigenous Land-Based Education*, is to prepare our students to queer their own pedagogical practices. We explore topics such as non-binary views of humans and more-than-humans; Indigenous gender continuums and sexual diversity; and essentialism in nature-based education. By the end of the course, students are expected to understand queering as both a concept and an action; to have examined and disrupted their own binary or essentialized constructions related to humans and more-than-humans; to have critically analyzed essentialism and social identity constructions; and to have situated what they've learned in their own personal and pedagogical contexts and used it to queer their own praxis.

In 2020's online version of the course, we were able to (virtually) host guest speakers, who brought their own practices in queering land-based pedagogy. For example, in their presentation, the Métis/Michif geographer Dr. Max Liboiron used a simple drawing exercise to unpack the construction of knowledge, explaining that, in physical terms, any line is no more than a series of points. To see it as a line, we must (without thinking) fill in the gaps between the points. We are trained to think in similar ways, filling the gaps between what we know as facts. How we fill the gaps is determined by any number of factors that influence our thinking. For example, this might mean that when we are reckoning with ethical issues, we include people in our considerations but not animals or other living beings. Dr. Liboiron's research focuses on marine plastic pollution, and they shared a queer, feminist and anti-colonial project, the development of the open source DIY BabyLegs tool, which empowers citizen scientists to monitor plastic pollution in waterways, an

act of accountability to the people, fish and other animals who rely on that waterway for survival (Liboiron, 2017).⁴

Throughout our Indigenous Land-Based Education Master's concentration, each course includes a component in which students observe, over a specific number of days, an astronomical feature (e.g., the position of the moon, the sunrise or sunset, etc.), and analyze their observations, reflecting on its links to their own cosmology. Students record their observations, analysis and reflections in a journal. Because this activity is embedded in each course, when we review their journals, we can see, traced out on the pages, their paradigm shifts as they move through the program. In their first year, when students are just beginning to understand what an Indigenous paradigm might entail, their entries typically focus on describing the feature. As they progress in the program, they gather knowledge and theory from other Indigenous teachers and thinkers, and start to recognize that they, too, have their own knowledge or theories. In our online queering course, they were asked to consider how heteropatriarchy and colonialism influence their own and other people's understandings of the feature (part of the natural order of the universe) that they have been observing, and how that might translate to their own pedagogy. The practice made the students aware of the ways in which entrenched hierarchies and assumed genders influence processes such as the claiming and naming of land or animals. The students in this cohort each come from different Indigenous cultures and communities, each with its own distinct cosmology and origin or creation stories. In one, the moon might be referred to as a grandmother and, in another, a brother or uncle. As students investigated their stories, some realized they had been deeply influenced by

⁴ Max Liboiron's academic, research and artistic work can be found at maxliboiron.com.

Christianity. They then reflected on their own pedagogical practice, determining how they could share these stories or teachings with their students without replicating that hidden narrative.

The cosmology journaling required students to think through theories that guide what they teach. A performance exercise gave students an opportunity to reflect on and expand their teaching practice. When I first taught the course in person, students were assigned readings to present to the class. Rather than present their articles by highlighting key points, asking questions, or jigsawing, they worked in groups, read and interpreted the article, and then prepared a group performance that expressed their understanding of the article.

This exercise, which required students to move theory into a pedagogical action, had worked well, and we wanted to retain it in the online course. To prepare students, the Colombian performance artist and scholar Dr. Praba Pilar⁵ provided a remote lecture/workshop, discussing components of performance, and walking participants through exercises and a process they could use to develop their own performances. As before, the students then worked in groups, reading, interpreting and performing their responses to articles. They recorded their performances and uploaded the recordings to share with their classmates and the instructional team. Each group received feedback from their fellow students and their instructors, as well as Dr. Pilar, who provided written feedback. Performance is a very ‘live’ art practice, that is, a performance is created in and by the moment-to-moment interactions between a performer and their audience. It is a relational practice. This cannot be recreated or easily taught online. In spite of this, as noted in Dr. Pilar’s feedback, the students stepped up. They were clearly engaged, bringing a range of approaches to their work.

⁵ Praba Pilar’s performance and academic work can be found at prabapilar.com.

Working without an audience, many brought their family or other members of their pandemic ‘bubble’ into their piece. They incorporated culturally charged sites, symbols and activities (land, water, sky, moss, ice, red clothing, drums, tackle boxes, plastic toy animals, newspapers, written words, silence, train tracks, dams, harvesting, portaging, tea making and trash making) into their performances, trying on new forms of communication that can be incorporated into their teaching practice.

Delivering a land-based course online has not been without challenges. Students in our cohort live and work in locations that are separated from each other by geographical distance and time zones, factors that have required careful planning of both our class schedule and student workload. We also recognize that students may not have access to all the equipment (computer, camera, editing software), services (reliable and affordable access to the internet) or living conditions (space and time in which they can prepare for and participate fully in their online classes) needed to get the most out of an online class, and that this may be especially true in the context of the pandemic. In spite of the challenges they faced, our students found ways to work together, enjoyed their assignments and were engaged by course content, supported and gave each other feedback in ways that fed their growth as educators, and pushed themselves out of their comfort zones to think differently and teach differently.

References

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