

Project 291

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History Underground: The Road to Reconciliation

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The Research Question

How does experiential learning impact ELA A30 students' learning and genuine consideration of what a call to reconciliation means for students as individuals but also in the context of the community they represent?

Origins of Project

This idea was born out of profound restlessness – a sense in our classrooms that we as non-Indigenous teachers were attempting to engage a classroom of largely non-Indigenous students in learning around the history of residential schools and a lingering sense of tokenism seemed to colour each experience. We began to recognize this as “residential school fatigue” – that inevitable point in each class in each semester where students are introduced into the Indigenous unit. Eye rolls often ensue as students feel that they have heard it already, and essentially, they have. They have heard the bullet points of residential school atrocities and any impact of a true experience that continues to affect the relationship between settlers and Indigenous people is lost in translation.

After having taught in urban community schools for nine and 11 years respectively in diverse socio-economic classrooms with a significant Indigenous population, we were really attempting to meaningfully engage our current students with the weighted question of what reconciliation genuinely means. This was the place where our motivation began. A brief hallway meeting where our shared sentiment of the desire to find a way to avoid the “residential school fatigue” and invite students into a more authentic learning experience. It was through this lens, as settlers and educators seeking to reconcile our own experiences and walk out a personal journey to reconciliation, that we began to imagine whose voice needed to be heard, what land needed to be walked, and which relationships needed to be established. The next step was to move beyond the traditional classroom space and dynamic and to begin to meet and listen to Elders, Knowledge Keepers, community agencies, advocates, and those with personal experiences and connections that encompass our shared history from an authentic Indigenous perspective. These voices and by extension the relationships that were developed became the foundation of our project.

Project Purpose and Scope

In its simplest form, experiential learning means learning from experience or learning by doing. Experiential education first immerses learners in an experience and then encourages reflection about the experience to develop new skills, new attitudes, or new ways of thinking. (<https://brocku.ca/pedagogical-innovation/resources/experiential-education/pedagogy-of-experiential-education/>)

It has become clear to us that the journey towards reconciliation with students is greatly aided by experiential learning facilitated in an environment of vulnerability and open sharing. The intention is an invitation to building relationships with marginalized communities, with forgotten histories, with the land, and with the space. At its heart, this journey is about authenticity – it is not about token lesson plans or residential school bullet points. This approach involves teachers stepping out of the traditional hierarchy inherent to the classroom dynamic and moving personally, humbly, and heartfully into an individual journey towards reconciliation. Students and teachers become co-participants in the experience and commit to allowing for truth and vulnerability to lead. Furthermore, given the history of broken promises and dominated relationships, the hope is to not be content with merely a temporary learning experience but to move towards action and agency.

“Teachers in particular have a sacred responsibility to ensure that all their children, regardless of their heritage, are able to think about four key questions throughout their education: where do I come from, where am I going, why am I here, and most importantly, who am I? Education systems matter to us as humans, and should be designed to give a child answers to these very basic, yet profound, questions.” (<http://rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/kairos-canada/2016/06/murray-sinclair-education-key-to-reconciliation>) This sentiment from Murray Sinclair is the heart of our project. Students all come from different places, and these differences help to define them and their story. The purpose of this project is to change this narrative and shift these stories to one of deeper understanding of Indigenous issues and reconciliation. Throughout the semester, students will have an opportunity to participate in a variety of experiences that will help their stories grow.

Project Specifics

- Pose question to students and the school community: What does reconciliation mean to you?
- Provide for meaningful time and space to sit with this question – individually and as a group.
- Provide authentic voices to assist students in this thinking – agencies, Elders, life speakers, and people who have experienced situations first-hand.
- Provide opportunity to visit spaces that are significant and meaningful toward reconciliation – in doing so, we are attempting to address the historical geographic power dynamic in colonization.
- Foster relationship building between students, school community, and agencies in North Central.
- Allow students time to reflect and deconstruct their own narratives and integrate their experiences to allow for a new perspective on reconciliation.

Narrative Inquiry

Narrative inquiry is a way of understanding and inquiring into experience through “collaboration between researcher and participants, over time, in a place or series of places, and in social interaction with milieus.”

Our methods of gathering data used the narrative inquiry approach and include written narratives (pre- and post-learning experience), a narrative photo essay, and a variety of other classroom formats including an inquiry project, panel presentation, and personal interviews.

In narrative inquiry, it is important to consider three different ways of justifying the research: Personal, Practical, and Social Justification. Essentially our students will examine their own narratives while being cognizant of other stories around them, reconciling what action is necessary to take.

We used a pre- and post-narrative using the same prompt to address personal growth. A personal interview after the completion of the personal narrative was also used to gauge the students’ growth.

Why Is Experiential Learning Necessary When Learning About Reconciliation?

- Reconciliation is about more than just talk – it is about action.
- Students need to experience and hear the truths for them to be able to understand the importance of reconciliation.
- Allows students opportunities to experience rather than just to read about topics/ issues.
- Moves the issues from just being a “head issue” to being a “heart issue.”
- Provides opportunities for personal connections and relationships to be made.

Experiences

The students participating in this class were able to visit a number of significant sites and places to do their learning. At each location, we were joined by authentic voices to speak to and share their stories to better help the students understand the issues. The idea is that students need to connect the historical wrongdoings to the present to be able to understand the why.

The experiences we participated in were:

- The Blanket Exercise
- Regina Indian Industrial School Site
- Place of Reflection (Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls Memorial Site)
- Muscowpetung and Pasqua Reserve Educational Exchange
- White Pony Lodge walk
- Visit to North Central Family Centre and All Nations Hope
- Making Treaty 4 (Globe Theatre Performance)
- Grad Powwow

These experiences allowed students to be a part of something beyond their own community. For many of my students, they had never been to North Central yet alone a reserve. These experiences challenged their biases and forced them to really look at their own belief systems. For some this was incredibly challenging, as they had grown up learning a much different narrative, but for others, families joined in and participated in some of our experiences as well.

How Do Authentic Voices and Connections to Spaces and Community Shift Student Thinking and Understanding?

Speakers joined us on each of our experiences. These voices acted as guides but also as supports as they shared their stories and their truths. Our speakers were so open and honest with the students and showed such vulnerability that my students, in turn, also opened up and shared their own pieces of trauma. Our speakers continued to guide this group throughout the semester. They responded to emails and many visited more than once to continue to offer support for students who wanted to learn more or who felt they were struggling with understanding. Our speakers always offered a safe space for students to share and to ask questions. Nothing was off limits, which was incredibly powerful. Both students and speakers were incredibly open in their questions and their responses. For all of my students, having real people share their truths made these issues real and personal. The shift from head to heart.

Findings

- Students started and finished with the same journal, which allowed me to gauge their growth in reconciliation. This was very beneficial as it gave my students and myself an exemplar in which to compare their growth and learning.
- The idea of the project was to allow students meaningful ways to connect to reconciliation and to move the idea of reconciliation from just a head issue to a heart issue as well. This happened in so many ways. Students started to understand that the issues many of them had projected to being issues affecting other communities were really issues in our own community. They also started to see past the stereotypes and see why so many Indigenous people in our communities suffer from the long-term impacts of residential schools, the '60s Scoop, and other injustices.
- The goal of the project was to create a desire and need to act and for students to feel like they needed to be part of making change happen. This also happened in so many ways. Students started to volunteer at agencies in our core area; they maintained relationships built with speakers in our classroom; and for many of them, reconciliation began to guide them in their futures.
- They also had conversations around the dinner table that had never happened before, and parents reached out. Some parents joined us on some of our experiences, but many of them had questions – the learning started to expand to beyond the classroom and our school and into our school community.
- This project made it clear that students need to personally feel something about the topics for them to truly care about the issue. This logic can apply to any subject area and any topic. We need to move beyond the walls of our classrooms and look at providing students with opportunities for hands-on experiential learning opportunities.
- The project went beyond my expectations. Students connected to the content, the people, and the locations in real and meaningful ways.

Student Voices – Quotes From Students About This Project

“I got to actually learn something instead of being told, kind of hearing it, trying to understand but not having a good enough grasp to understand, and I learned so much. That if you put yourself out there and are willing to listen, there are so many things you can hear. And things that you would never think to have heard.”

“I don’t want our world to be like that. I don’t want to notice that there is a man, an Indigenous male, being treated differently than me. For what? His skin colour, his race, his culture? None of these are valid reasons.”

“No matter what your job is, no matter what your title is, no matter what your race is, you help the world turn. Cause everyone has a special place. Sorry, I’ll say that again. Everyone has a special place, everyone has a meaning, everyone has a reason. And I’m not saying everyone knows their meaning, reason, whatever it is. But everyone does, and I believe that in my heart. And I believe I learned that from this class.”

“Cause at the end of the day, it’s not all the learning and it’s not all the essays and it’s not all the presentations. Those aren’t the things that really make classes, or you know, high school or work or whatever it is, meaningful. It’s the people and the relationships and the memories that you take with you. And I have a lot of good memories from those speakers. A lot of emotional memories with those speakers, because of what they shared.”

“Our speakers have trusted us enough to share their stories, and I think they’ve trusted us enough to share their stories because they know that we have that responsibility to make sure that the experiences that they shared don’t happen again and they aren’t repeated. As well as, we have the knowledge of what they shared, and the experiences they shared, and now we know that something needs to be done about them.”

“Before this class, I had only ever really had the opportunity to speak with very, very few Indigenous peoples. And they were Elders in elementary school, or it was a speaker that came in to talk about residential school and everything like that. But this class opened up doors and introduced me to so many people; I can’t even count how many speakers we had in and how many interesting people we got to talk to.”

"There's so, so much more to reconciliation than learning and being taught the same facts. Even though they are heartbreaking, it's important to know that the past did impact the future and our present, and how it's going to keep impacting us. And more importantly, the Indigenous peoples if we don't do anything to change. And I think that this class did give us that opportunity because we got to meet all those people, and because we got to hear those incredible stories. Some of them are so heartbreaking to learn, but it really gave me that sense that I'm so privileged in my life."

"An important thing that I thought about in this class was that it does get uncomfortable, but that's what needs to happen. I think that's what people are scared about when it comes to reconciliation."

"This whole class, overall for me, has been a success because I feel like a new person. And I feel that I am making a difference just by learning and being able to pass on this information to my family and my friends. Because I have been, I always talk about this class at home because it's so important and so big in my life."

"This class gave me the opportunity to express what I value. And although I do value words and writing and everything, I find it beautiful in many ways, but I find that I express myself much better in things like poems and painting and videos and photos."

"This course has given me the opportunity to look at myself from a different point of view, and see that I have privilege, but I want to use my privilege in a way to understand what other cultures have and further make myself a better member of my community and open my heart and mind."

"There was no way you could have this class without challenges. It was hard emotionally, because you know, you're dealing with these like, really heavy topics and these really serious issues. And I don't want to say it makes you feel guilty, but you know, it does. And it drives a sense of responsibility, and I don't think that's a bad thing because it makes people want to take action. I think that sense of responsibility is important, but I think sometimes you struggle with maybe what path is best, or what thing is best to do to fix that."

"Because, you know, you don't get that opportunity very often in classes. I think if more classes were formed like that, we'd probably be doing better as an education system. I like that we did the action piece in this class, we didn't just talk about things. There's so many classes where you just, you know, you talk and you have all the discussions, which yes, it's important. But you know, to also actually like go out and do something, you know? To actually be involved in the community and be involved in what we're doing. And then I like that we had lots of reflection."

"You've taught me more about reconciliation, Indigenous people, all of that, than I've learned in elementary school. And I guess I didn't learn that much in elementary school like I was supposed to. So, thank you for being a part of the reconciliation journey, and I hope you're able to continue this project, as it was very helpful. And I hope you're able to bring other kids to understand and know about reconciliation and the truth about Indigenous people, so we can move forward with Indigenous people and make a better future for them, and just for Canada as a whole."

"This semester allowed me to start my path to reconciliation, by giving me the chance to listen to people around the community and their stories. Reconciliation to me is not taught in a history class, instead, it's going out and talking to people, and taking action."

"The biggest challenge for me this class was definitely learning about the truth. What I mean by the truth is what really happened and what is currently happening."

"I see a bald eagle soaring through the blue sky over the Muscowpetung reserve just as we arrive at the top of the valley. I see change in this moment. This moment will forever be in my memory. I remember the amazing teacher we spent the day with saying "That is a sign that you guys are here for a reason." I felt as if my decisions leading up to that moment were all a sign of fate, just something so I could experience that moment. At that moment I felt overwhelmed with a sense of connection and pride."

"My last huge takeaway was that definitive moment that I decided that this is truly what I want my life to be dedicated to. That this is something I absolutely want to pursue a career in and be able to make a difference in the future."

Final Thoughts

In the end, this project went beyond my wildest expectations. Students put their heart and soul into the work needed to truly learn about reconciliation, and the impacts are still being felt. We were so honoured to be joined by so many incredible people (see Special Acknowledgements) and thank you to the McDowell Foundation for making this project possible. As a final note, I want to stress how important it is to join students on their learning journey. This can be scary, but the rewards far outweigh the fear!

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- All Nations Hope
- White Pony Lodge

Resources

"Murray Sinclair: Education Is Key to Reconciliation." *Rabble.ca*, 9 June 2016, rabble.ca/blogs/bloggers/kairos-canada/2016/06/murray-sinclair-education-key-to-reconciliation.

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