

# **Decolonizing & Indigenizing LIS**

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## **ABSTRACT**

What does it mean to Indigenize and decolonize a Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) program? This paper outlines the process by which one Canadian MLIS program responded to the reports from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada and the Canadian Federation of Library Association Indigenous Matters Committee that specify the implications and provide guidelines for best practices for librarianship and the information professions across Canada. In outlining the challenges of re-engineering our standard procedures, practices, and pedagogies, this paper provides a path forward for other MLIS programs looking to critically evaluate and develop their own programs.

## **ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS**

Education; pedagogy; students; curriculum; social justice.

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

decolonizing; indigenizing; course development.

## **INTRODUCTION**

In 2015 the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada completed their investigation into Canada's Indian residential school systems and released their final report (2015a) as well as 94 Calls to Action (2015b). Reconciliatory calls to action included ones specific to both libraries and archives, and to educational institutions. The Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA) followed up on the calls to action with their own Truth and Reconciliation Report and Recommendations to specify the implications and create best practices for libraries across Canada.

The following proposal speaks to course and pedagogy development in a Library and Information Science (LIS) program in order to address relevant aspects of these calls. In our work to develop and implement a course on indigenizing and decolonizing LIS, we address how we re-engineered standard procedures, practices, policies, and pedagogies, and the challenges we experience in making such changes sustainable. The course provides a foundation for Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) faculty and students to engage in indigenizing and decolonizing work in their own practices—to this end our goals were to cultivate respect, explore, and begin to understand the cultural, pedagogic, and epistemological needs and practices of Indigenous communities.

Through the process of developing this course, we had the following questions: How do we develop curriculum for the next generations of librarians and other information professionals that integrates principles of reconciliation and actively decolonizes our fields of study, research, and professional practice? How do we best incorporate Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing into the educational, organizational, and cultural structures of our MLIS program? Both of these questions are rooted in the need and desire to first acknowledge the unfathomable harms that have been done to Indigenous peoples in Canada as a part of the European Colonization project, and then, to work towards reconciliation.

## **BACKGROUND RESEARCH**

We approached the development of this course with many years of experience as teachers in MLIS programs, responsible for designing and evaluating formal and informal curriculum to support our students' learning about LIS knowledges and practice. As women with varied backgrounds, we stand in relation to this work as a second-generation citizen of settler-immigrants from Western Europe, as a new immigrant to Canada from fourth generation, American, settlers-immigrants in the United States, as a third generation Canadian, and as a First Nation person of Stoney and Cree descent and fourth generation Canadian. We acknowledge the legacy of our own colonialist ideologies and its consequences for our pedagogy.

We committed to educating ourselves about Indigenous histories and literatures, contemporary social justice issues regarding Indigenous cultures, land acknowledgements and treaty relations, and language preservation. We continue to develop our understandings of the tensions of trying to understand, disrupt, and dismantle the influence of settler-colonialism in these contexts.

Since early 2017 we have worked as a group to educate ourselves and to develop relationships with Indigenous community members. The work to building community relationships began with our local contexts. We consulted with the First Nations Consultant at the Southern Ontario Library Service, local First Nations Public Library directors in Ontario, the director of the Indigenous Student Centre at our university and the university's Special Advisor to the President (Indigenous Initiatives), among others. Through the development of these relationships, we were invited to attend the meeting of the Indigenous Task Group at the Ontario Library Association (OLA). In addition, we facilitated a sharing circle at the OLA conference that was attended by Indigenous and settler LIS instructors, librarians, and library students. This kind of continuing meaningful engagement with community is necessary at all stages of the course development. This lengthy process was necessary to develop trust and relationships with our Indigenous LIS and university experts.

## **FINDINGS FROM CONSULATION AND RELATIONSHIP BUILDING**

Based on these consultations and the relationships we developed, we learned the following:

- That incoming students do not have a strong baseline knowledge of Indigenous peoples, knowledges, and concerns. We can also not assume that they have knowledge about the contexts of Truth and Reconciliation, nor about current debates and initiatives surrounding reconciliation, conciliation, and decolonization in contemporary society. This lack of knowledge impacts their ability to readily understand the place of libraries as a source of colonialist ideas and as a site of colonialist ideologies.

- That settler students require this knowledge to become better allies and advocates for Indigenous library staff and community members.
- That Indigenous students require this content in order to be recognized, and to feel safe and accepted in the program.
- That content about Indigenous peoples and their experiences and how those relate to LIS cannot just be relegated to an elective course.
- That one of the most effective ways to decolonize libraries and information institutions is by recruiting, hiring, and supporting Indigenous people into the library and information professions.

Additionally, we created the following objectives for the course:

1. To continue to develop and maintain relationships with local Indigenous partners by establishing an advisory committee that meets regularly (building on our first community meeting in January 2019)
2. To create a safe and respectful space in our MLIS curriculum specifically for Indigenous students to consider and undertake graduate work with us
3. To contribute to instructor capacity to teach Indigenous content by encouraging community members, faculty, staff, and students to work together to integrate Indigenous knowledge into existing LIS courses
4. To establish learning outcomes for MLIS students that respond directly to the TRC recommendations and that demonstrate their capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, mutual respect, and their knowledge and understanding of LIS in the context of Indigenous traditions, histories, accountability to land, past and current injustices, and contemporary issues.

### **COURSE IMPLEMENTATION**

Through the acquisition of a \$10,000 Fellowship in Teaching Innovation award from our university's Centre for Teaching and Learning, we were able to design and implement a course that helps address our overall goals and the findings from our community consultations and relationship building.

The course opened with a ceremony from an Elder who shared her wisdom and the students participated in a KAIROS blanket exercise, a teaching tool (<http://www.kairosblanketexercise.org>) designed to facilitate learning about the history of the experience of Indigenous peoples in Canada within a reconciliation framework. The working group members became the course facilitators, but not the instructors for the course. Instead, expert Indigenous LIS professionals and scholars were hired (via Zoom, given the current COVID-19 pandemic) as instructors. The five main instructors for the course focus on topics associated with the program's five core courses. Additional Indigenous librarians have been brought in for Ask-Me-Anything (AMA) sessions, and Indigenous authors have shared how their stories drive reconciliation through education.

Group discussion in the course involves sharing circles every three weeks where all students share a thought, emotion, or takeaway from the session provided by the guest lecturer. These

sharing circles have provided rich context to the course and students look forward to hearing from each other during this time.

The main assignments for this course are reflection essays. After each guest lecturer, students were tasked with writing a reflective essay outlining any changes in their thinking and learning. An event that claims to teach decolonizing principles must ask its learners to engage in critical self-reflection; Indigenous pedagogy “accepts students’ cognitive search for learning processes they can internalize.” (Battiste, 2002, p. 18) Freire (1994) argues the importance of dialogue and critical thinking to remove oppressive Western thought from both the oppressed and the oppressors, “Knowledge emerges only through invention and re-invention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, helpful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.” (p. 53)

Lastly, for their final project students are developing proposals for future projects. The purpose of this assignment is to give students an opportunity to integrate some of knowledge they gained over the term and apply it to a future real-world professional project proposal. The types of projects students proposed included some of the following:

- A collection development project to decolonize current collections
- Developing a LibGuide for resources for a defined group of users or specific course
- Decolonizing and improving library spaces
- Developing an Indigenous zine collection for a library
- Policy document development for a library (e.g., decolonizing training in the library for library staff)
- Start a project of reconciliation in a library (e.g., Indigenous book talks, storytimes in the library)

## **TAKEAWAY**

Through our two-year process of relationship building and community consultation and in the actual implementation of the course, there were a number of takeaways that may prove helpful to other MLIS programs who choose to do this type of work.

1. As most LIS faculty and instructors are not Indigenous, most early work will be developing their own knowledge and critiquing their assumptions and biases. There is a need to understand the historical and ongoing injustices experienced by Indigenous Peoples across Turtle Island and around the world. Additionally, there needs to be an understanding of local Indigenous communities. While there may not be reserves nearby, there may be a Friendship Centre for local Indigenous peoples.
2. Developing strong community relationships is key. Showing a willingness to listen and learn from local Indigenous peoples is part of what develops trust and relationships that can provide additional insight into pedagogy, history, society, culture. It needs to be noted that relationship building takes time. For our project we spent two years developing our relationships with Indigenous community members before we even began to design and implement the course.
3. As most faculty or instructors moving this kind of pedagogy forward are likely to be settlers, it’s likely they may be intimidated by the process and the desire not to mess it up.

Even with significant background knowledge acquisition, know that you will mess it up at some point. It's how we react to that error that sets the tone for the future. Being humble in our mistakes and seeking to correct them will allow continued forward development.

4. Getting administration on board may be complicated as this type of pedagogy and course development is a long process that, in the end, is not set up like other classes likely have been in the past. Our initial offering of the course is unique in that it is supported by a \$10,000 Teaching Innovation Fellowship. It's unclear yet what future iterations of the course may look like.
5. The importance of appropriate compensation of Elders and Indigenous experts cannot be understated. Compensating these folks for knowledge and wisdom within appropriate cultural protocol frameworks is vital to the success of such efforts.

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