

# **SoTL as Reconciliation: Seeking to Contribute to Decolonization and Indigenization of Teaching, Learning, and Research in Canadian Universities**

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## **ABSTRACT**

In this article, I develop guiding questions to explore ways that the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) can contribute to advancing reconciliation in Canadian universities. I draw on decolonization and Indigenization literature to reflect on my SoTL practice, identify tensions, and look ahead to next steps in my research. Ultimately, I aim to invite co-reflection and extend dialogue within the community of SoTL scholars towards contributing to reconciliation through SoTL.

*Keywords:* Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL), Indigenization, decolonization, approaches to SoTL, critical SoTL

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Transformational work is needed within Canadian universities to live up to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada's Calls to Action (Munroe, 2021). Universities have the responsibility to advance reconciliation by helping to shift how Canadians think about and act towards Indigenous people, and by supporting the resurgence of Indigenous culture, language, and knowledge (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). Reconciliation enacted by universities involves both decolonization and Indigenization (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2021; Wilson & Hughes, 2019) and must involve fundamental shifts in teaching, learning, research, and the university structures that support them (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). I believe that the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (SoTL) can contribute to advancing reconciliation because of its capacity to enact transformational change (Bernstein, 2013; Hutchings et al., 2013; Plews & Amos, 2020), advance social justice (Behari-Leak, 2020), and redefine ways of knowing within universities (Coleman et al., 2023). More than a collection of individual studies, transformational change is advanced through collective inquiry by the community of SoTL scholars (Plews & Amos, 2020). The annual Symposium for Scholarship of Teaching and Learning, hosted by Mount Royal University's Mokakiiks Centre for SoTL and from which *Imagining SoTL* stems, has been a site of ongoing dialogue into the connections between SoTL and decolonization and Indigenization. Hewson and Easton (2022) challenged SoTL scholars in Canada to attend to our responsibilities to contribute to decolonization. Weasel Head (2023) envisioned an equitable and relationally accountable SoTL inspired by Indigenous pedagogy. She argued that SoTL can work to deconstruct the power of colonial thought by including Indigenous ways of knowing and being. Many presentations have featured examples of how scholars are seeking to advance reconciliation through SoTL (Anselmo & Lindstrom, 2022; Hill, 2022; Lemieux, 2022; Parkes, 2023).

In this article I aim to contribute to and extend this dialogue. It is important to closely attend to matters of axiology in taking up this work. SoTL is embedded within the hierarchies of power in the academy (Fedoruk & Lindstrom, 2022). Weasel Head (2023) called for bringing a critical perspective and identified challenges of engaging in SoTL within colonial legacies. Styres (2019) guides me in framing decolonizing work as an ongoing effort to examine and shift assumptions and make changes in practice towards new ways forward. Connected to this, Weasel Head (2023) suggested looking inward to uncover epistemological assumptions. To this end, I seek to employ a critical reflective lens characteristic of decolonizing methodologies (Kovach, 2009). I locate myself to situate the knowledge I share (Kovach, 2009), and I share stories from my own experience (Archibald, 2008). I interconnect my thinking (epistemology) and doing (methods and axiology) (Kovach, 2009), and ultimately seek to critically reflect on my practice to open up new possibilities for SoTL as reconciliation.

## SITUATING MYSELF

It is important to situate this work in my context, culture, relations, and responsibilities to root the knowledge I share and make clear the limits of my knowledge (Kovach, 2009). Decolonization and Indigenization work is highly contextual (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2021). In situating myself, I aim to help readers more fully interpret my work in context. I do not purport to project my experience onto others, rather I hope to open up interpretive possibilities for readers to reflect on their own context and positionality.

I am a member of the Métis Nation of Alberta. My ancestry traces back to the historic Red River Métis as well as to Eastern European and British settlers. I work and live on the traditional lands of the Niitsitapi in a place that is known as Mohkinstsis in Blackfoot. My presence here is predicated on Treaty 7, which was signed by the Siksika, the Piikani, the Kainai, the Tsuut'ina, and the Îyârhe Nakoda Nations. I am an assistant professor in the Department of Education at Mount Royal University. I have been a teacher for over twenty years and believe in education as a site of hope. I teach fourth-year teacher candidates and supervise them in a major practicum in elementary school classrooms. As a teacher educator and a Métis scholar, I am responsible to contribute to the inclusion of Indigenous perspectives in education for all of our children. I am seeking to unlearn colonialism alongside my students and colleagues from a place of awareness of how deeply ingrained colonial frontier logics (Donald, 2012a) are in not only the structures of the university, but also in my own thinking as a result of forty years of learning and teaching within the Western school tradition. I am seeking to attend to this tension by engaging in learning from Elders, participating in Métis cultural practices, learning Michif, connecting with the land, and reflecting on my practice with others.

## GUIDING QUESTIONS TO REFLECT ON SOTL AS RECONCILIATION

In this section, I draw on literature exploring the decolonization and Indigenization of post-secondary education to frame four guiding questions to inspire reflection on SoTL as reconciliation. I use the questions to reflect on my own SoTL practice, identify tensions, and look ahead to next steps in my research.

### *How Can SoTL Interrogate and Disrupt Assimilative Frameworks?*

SoTL can advance reconciliation by contributing to the work of decolonizing post-secondary education. Decolonization is a process of transforming assimilative frameworks. It involves disrupting the dominance and taken for granted neutrality of Eurocentric knowledges and drawing awareness to the ways in which they are interconnected with cultural attitudes, values, and presumptions (Battiste, 2013).

Decolonization involves unearthing and untangling complex webs of oppression created by colonization (Dei, 2000). Decolonizing work is essential because without it efforts to include Indigenous perspectives within dominant Eurocentric frameworks can result in marginalization, assimilation, and tokenism (Styres, 2019). Canadian universities have faced criticism for using the language of decolonization but not enacting associated changes (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Munroe, 2021; Tuck & Yang, 2012). SoTL can contribute to moving decolonization beyond rhetoric to classroom-level action.

In Hill et al. (2023), SoTL provided a vehicle for our research team to apply decolonizing principles to assessment practice across multiple sections of a course. The project resulted in changes to the tasks we designed, the ways we provided feedback to inform learning, and how grades were determined (Hill et al., 2023). Moreover, we identified barriers to decolonizing assessment, including university grading policies, student expectations, and the limits of instructor knowledge. This points to an important role that SoTL can play in decolonizing work: identifying and making visible systemic barriers to decolonization that are embedded in the structures, pedagogies, and curriculum of universities. Kahpeaysewat et al. (2023) offers a second example in which my co-authors and I reflected on and shared the hopes, complexities, tensions, and frustrations that we experienced in seeking to develop an Indigenous science course. We documented specific barriers to Indigenization in the university that may not have previously been recognized, including the course outline requirements, the general education outcomes, the curriculum approval process, the workload assignment process, and the faculty hiring process (Kahpeaysewat et al., 2023). SoTL offers an opportunity for those who are directly working in university classrooms to attend to, document, and share what they are learning as they enact decolonization.

A tension is present in seeking to deconstruct colonial structures while simultaneously working within them. Tuck and Yang (2012) assert that because decolonization is an unworking of settler colonialism it is necessarily “unsettling” (p. 3). Hill et al. (2023) and Kahpeaysewat et al. (2023) document challenging situations and the personal toll experienced in pushing for what Louie (2019) refers to as “uncomfortable change” (p. 794). I have found that by engaging in decolonizing work within a SoTL frame the research itself provides a vehicle to attend to and share these challenges. Making these challenges visible creates the possibility that collectively we can respond to them.

I aspire to continue to make visible the decolonization work I engage in through SoTL. Furthermore, I am interested in contributing to community building among SoTL scholars advancing this work. I wonder if creating a venue to bring this work together, such as a special edition of a journal or an edited collection, might represent a valuable contribution.

### ***How Can SoTL Centre the Voices of Indigenous People?***

SoTL can be a platform by which Indigenous peoples contribute to transforming teaching, learning, and research. Universities in Canada have made some progress towards addressing the underrepresentation of Indigenous students, faculty, and administrators (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018; Munroe, 2021). However, increasing the numbers of Indigenous peoples in a university does not make it “a more Indigenous space, but rather it works to increase the number of Indigenous bodies in an already established Western academic structure and culture” (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018, p. 220). Indigenous inclusion needs to be paired with mechanisms to centre the voices of Indigenous peoples in decision and policy-making processes (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018).

SoTL research has provided me, as an early career Indigenous tenure-track faculty member, with a pathway to effect change in teaching, learning, and research (Crawford et al., 2022; Danyluk et al., 2023; Hill, et al., 2023; Hill et al., in press; Kahpeaysewat et al., 2023). Furthermore, SoTL research can create opportunities for Indigenous students to contribute to transforming the university. Partnering with students in SoTL reframes the hierarchical structure of the academy and activates the experience and knowledge of students towards change making (Healey et al., 2014; Hill et al., 2019). The Indigenous student co-authors in Crawford et al. (2022) and Kahpeaysewat et al. (2023) contributed to advancing Indigenization of teaching and learning as partners with me and other faculty members involved in these projects.

Attending to considerations of power, coercion, and risk are paramount when including students as partners in SoTL research (Healey et al., 2014). In addition to the informed consent process, I have followed Innocente et al. (2022) and discussed with students what they are willing to and feel is appropriate to share. Further, I dialogue with students about creating a reciprocal partnership in which they benefit by positioning their learning goals as central to the project. In the context of working with Indigenous students, attention must be paid to ethical considerations regarding the sharing of cultural knowledge (Government of Canada, 2022). Dialogue with students has been central to determining what is appropriate to share. Furthermore, I have employed methodologies that provide for student co-authors to write in first-person narrative. This situates their contributions in their identity and voice rather than subsuming their work. A tension exists in leading students into pushing for uncomfortable change within a system that needs to enact significant structural shifts before it represents an ethical space to include Indigenous perspectives (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). I have engaged students in ongoing reflective dialogue explicitly regarding these tensions and have attempted to mentor them as we navigate the tensions together.

Looking ahead I am interested including traditional practices such as prayer and ceremony as a foundation for engaging in resurgence work alongside students (Corntassel, 2012). Elders will be in important in this work because, in Indigenous

communities, Elders are entrusted with leading cultural teachings and sharing wisdom to determine what is appropriate in particular situations (Fry, 2017).

### ***How Can SoTL Advance the Interests of Indigenous Peoples?***

SoTL's capacity to enact change can be leveraged to advance the interests of Indigenous peoples. A goal for universities to pursue in advancing reconciliation is to create an education system that is "responsive to and responsible for moving the self-determining interests of Indigenous communities forward" (Styres, 2019, p. 59). This requires universities to reframe the exploitative colonial relationship they enact with Indigenous communities and become a force for Indigenous justice, resurgence, and sovereignty (Smith, 2021).

I have endeavoured to engage in SoTL work that is explicitly focused on advancing justice for Indigenous peoples. For example, in a study entitled "Combatting Racism Towards Indigenous Peoples Through the Inclusion of Indigenous Perspectives in the Classroom," a team of Indigenous and non-Indigenous co-authors from universities across Alberta sought to understand and improve the role of teacher education in addressing anti-Indigenous racism through our practice as teacher educators. We surveyed university instructors, university students, and in-service teachers to learn more about the ways they were teaching anti-racism, what learning they had done to support their anti-racist practice, and what they needed to advance their anti-racist practice. We have shared the findings of this study with our colleagues to inform change in the practice of teacher education (Danyluk et al., 2023; Hill, 2022) and with in-service teachers to advance anti-racist teaching in K-12 (Danyluk et al., 2024).

Styres (2019) envisioned educational institutions in allyship. Allyship must disrupt the colonial pattern and requires the return of control to Indigenous people (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018). As a next step in my SoTL practice, I aspire to engage in research that is more directly connected to the self-determined needs of Indigenous communities. I have been working to foster a reciprocal relationship with local Indigenous school authorities. I hope that from these relationships opportunities will emerge for my teaching and research to emanate from and contribute to these communities. In this work it will be important to centre the expectations, needs, and processes of working in a good way with Indigenous community partners, rather than focusing on the timelines and expectations associated with university structures, such as grant and tenure processes. Tensions exist in seeking to navigate this as an early career tenure-track faculty member. I hope that making these tensions visible within SoTL research will inform collective Indigenous work in universities to reframe institutional processes. For example, I am involved in work at our university to take up Louie's (2019) call to apply Indigenous perspectives to the tenure and promotion criteria.

### ***How Can SOTL Centre the Ways of Knowing, Being, and Doing of Indigenous Peoples?***

SoTL can be a space in which Indigenous epistemologies thrive. Indigenization involves a resurgence of Indigenous knowledges and ways of knowing. This is important so that “Indigenous perspectives are the lens through which Indigenous issues are understood” (Gaudry & Lorenz, 2018, p. 224). Indigenous ways of being emanate from Indigenous ontological foundations and offer alternatives to colonial frameworks (Kovach, 2009; Smith, 2021). In my SoTL practice I have drawn on the Indigenous methodology of Métissage. Donald (2012b) theorizes Métissage as a way to circumvent and deconstruct colonial frontier logics by engaging in ethical relationality. Métissage has provided me with a way to story teaching and learning in relationship to the land (Crawford et al., 2022), to Elders’ stories (Crawford et al., 2022), to students’ stories (Crawford et al., 2022; Kahpeaysewat et al., 2023), and to colleagues’ stories (Crawford et al., 2022; Hill et al., in press).

In addition to drawing on Indigenous ways of creating knowledge, I have been seeking to include Indigenous perspectives on knowledge sharing and dissemination in my SoTL practice. Indigenous knowledge systems transmit knowledge and determine the validity of knowledge in ways that are different from Eurocentric knowledge systems (Kovach, 2009). Beyond publishing academic papers and presenting at academic conferences, I have sought to share what I am learning in my SoTL work by leading experiences that take place on the land, include traditional practices, and involve Elders (Mount Royal University, 2023). Drawing on Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing in my SoTL practice has both contributed to reconciliation and advanced my teaching and scholarship.

Tensions around misrepresentation, invalidation, and appropriation exist in including Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing within the assimilative frameworks of post-secondary institutions (Battiste, 2013; Louie et al., 2017; Smith, 2021). Restoule and Chaw-win-is (2017) remind us that knowledge is medicine: “It can be healing when used appropriately. Used incorrectly, it can also cause harm” (p.7). This work requires attending to “the social, political, cultural and personal implications of academic colonization, and the erasure/ appropriation of Indigenous knowledge” (Dei, 2000, p. 129). Hanson and Danyluk (2022) demonstrate that foregrounding tensions contributes to an ethical space. In many of my SoTL publications, my co-authors and I have written directly about ethical tensions and the axiological choices made (Crawford et al., 2022; Hill, et al., 2023; Kahpeaysewat et al., 2023). This is not about resolving tensions, but rather about positioning myself and my work within the tensions. Hanson and Danyluk (2022) offer some helpful questions to attend to: “What are my investments? ... Am I being respectful and humble? Am I being honest about what I know and how I have come to this knowledge?” (p. 4).

As I look ahead in my SoTL practice, I am interested in exploring ways to include Indigenous language in my teaching and SoTL practice. Little Bear (2002)

asserts that “language embodies a way a society thinks” (p. 78). I am inspired by Donald (2021) who draws on the Nêhiyaw wisdom concept wâhkôhtowin to animate and story his teaching practice. I am currently designing a new course and am working to include Michif concepts to frame knowledge creation in the course. I aspire to document and share my learning through SoTL.

## CONCLUSION

I hope that in reflecting on my practice I have opened up opportunities for reflection on decolonization and Indigenization within SoTL. I invite readers to respond, critique, and build on the ideas I have shared. I commit to advancing some of the next steps I have identified for myself and sharing back at future conferences and in future publication opportunities. This is the hope that SoTL offers me. I believe that in taking up decolonization and Indigenization by engaging in a collective inquiry with an ameliorative orientation and critical reflexivity we will take steps towards our responsibilities to advance reconciliation in Canada. I believe that central to this process must be relational engagement. I aspire to create spaces at the SoTL Symposium to engage in this work together and hope to connect with you there to continue the dialogue. Maarsii!

## AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

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