

Article

Doing our work in a good way: A framework of collaboration and a case for Indigenous-only writing classrooms

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Abstract

Since fall of 2021, University of Victoria has offered a section of the foundational writing course, *ATWP 135: Intro to Academic Writing* that is dedicated to Indigenous students. This course provides a space for first-year Indigenous students to find a sense of belonging with each other and in the university more broadly, experience anti-oppressive grading practices, develop the confidence to access Indigenous student supports, and navigate the broader institution. In this article, the authors (an Indigenous staff working as the Tri-Faculty Indigenous Resurgence Coordinator and a non-Indigenous faculty serving as the course instructor) discuss the development, delivery, and impact of this initiative. We share an example of promising practice for institutions to consider in the interest of supporting Indigenous student success and retention. In doing so, we also offer a model for collaboration across disciplines and across cultures based on shared values of vulnerability, openness, and honesty.

Introduction

Since fall of 2021, University of Victoria has offered an Indigenous-only section of the foundational writing course, *ATWP 135: Intro to Academic Writing*. This course provides a space for first-year Indigenous students to find a sense of belonging with each other and in the university more broadly, experience anti-oppressive grading practices, develop the confidence to access Indigenous student supports, and navigate the broader institution. Such a space is foundational to the success of all

students but is particularly key for Indigenous students who have historically been and continue to be systematically excluded from post-secondary education (Arvidson et al., 2020; Brayboy et al., 2015; Restoule et al., 2013). While there is growing body of literature about decolonizing the composition classroom, it is often in the context of the United States (Ruiz & Sánchez, 2016; Ruiz & Baca, 2017; Riviera, 2020; Cushman et al., 2019). We focus specifically on decolonizing the first-year writing classroom in the context of Canada.

Not only does this course exemplify how a first-year writing course can cultivate belonging for Indigenous students in the context of ongoing colonization, but the process of creating and delivering this course also provides a model for collaboration across disciplines and across cultures. We—an Indigenous staff working as the Tri-Faculty Indigenous Resurgence Coordinator and a non-Indigenous faculty serving as the course instructor—worked together closely to plan and deliver this course, and by doing so, have established a collaborative process based on shared values of vulnerability, openness, and honesty. We have strived throughout our collaboration in planning, delivery, evaluation, and dissemination of our work to engage with the project, each other, and the students *in a good way*.

The concept of doing things *in a good way* is common to many Indigenous communities; in nehiyaw (Cree) teachings, miyo (pronounced me-oh) means “good, well, beautiful, valuable” is connected to tâpwêwin (pronounced tap-way-win) meaning, “truth,” guide ethical practices (Kovach, 2021, p. 98); in ləkʷəŋən territories, the teaching of eyeʷsqəʷlewen (pronounced eye-SHKWAW-leh-wen), is described by ləkʷəŋən (pronounced leh-kw-ung-en) Elder, Elmer George, as “good heart, good mind, good feelings” (Titian, 2014). At the University of Victoria, the local ləkʷəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ (pronounced wh-say-neh-ch) Elders and leaders have asked us to follow the teachings of nnəw̱ es šx̱w̱ cən ʔay̱ šq̱w̱eləq̱w̱ən (in the ləkʷəŋən language) and ÁMEKṮ TFEN ÍY, ŚKÁLEÇEN (in the SENĆOŦEN language), which roughly mean in English, “bring in your good heart and mind” (University of Victoria, 2023a). The teachings of good heart, good mind guide us to do our work in a good way and keep us focused on the goal of creating and maintaining good feelings and good relations.

This paper is a document of research, conversation, collaboration, and connection. Drawing on Shaw Wilson’s (2008) *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods*,¹ we switch between writing for a larger audience of Canadian educators who might look for ways to support Indigenous students, and writing to each other about our experiences, successes, and anxieties. We use different fonts to distinguish these writing situations, and in doing so, we put into practice “relational

accountability”—a recognition that “relationships do not merely shape reality, they *are* reality” (Wilson, 2008, p. 7, emphasis in original). When we write together for an audience of educators, we use Cambria font. When we are writing as individuals to each other, we have our own fonts (Cochin for Lydia and Calibri for Loren). We weave together our voices in text, documenting our conversation and in doing so, we foreground our commitment to connection and relationships. In this way, we put into practice the values that we share and have shaped this whole project: collaboration, vulnerability, openness, and honesty.

Our paper has four parts. Part one describes the context for this paper in which we explain the course and the institutional environment. Part two provides an overview of survey data that we gathered to measure the impact of this course, including our methodology and findings. Part three documents our conversation with each other. For this conversation, we selected guiding questions to highlight the key aspects of our work, and we write to and about each other and our collaborative relationship. Part four concludes in one voice as we reflect on the previous sections in order to synthesize our learning and messages for others who are interested in decolonizing and Indigenizing post-secondary education. As a whole, this paper provides a framework of successful collaboration across cultures, an example of decolonizing and Indigenizing required writing courses, and a demonstration that working together under a model of relational accountability fosters belonging for students, staff, and faculty. Rather than providing a prescriptive, step-by-step approach for collaboration, we emphasize the importance of relational accountability, good feelings, and vulnerability, and working in a good way.

Part One: Context

Introducing ATWP 135

At the University of Victoria (UVic), all undergraduate students must satisfy the Academic Writing Requirement. One of the ways that this requirement can be met is by taking *ATWP 135: Academic Reading and Writing*. This is a multi-section course, meaning that there are multiple sections of the course offered in a semester (approximately 50 sections per year), and instructors use a common syllabus. The standard section of *ATWP 135* has 33 students per section. The course runs over a 12-week period,² and during this time students complete 4 major assignments: an academic summary of an article; a short essay on the persuasiveness of that same article for its intended audience; a scaffolded research paper; and a final portfolio.

In the Fall of 2021, UVic ran its first-ever-section of *ATWP 135* with enrollment limited to Indigenous Students. Research on Indigenous student success in post-secondary education demonstrates that greater persistence, retention, and success is fostered by: having spaces dedicated to Indigenous students; developing connection, community, and belonging; providing more personal, less public connections to guidance, support, and services; and providing small group and one-on-one settings (Brayboy et al., 2015). Creating ways for Indigenous students to “feel at home,” encouraging them to build on their own ways of knowing and being, and learn about how to navigate the institution without leaving behind their culture and community are key aspects of quality Indigenous student education and support (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991, p. 5). With this knowledge and with their lived experience as an Indigenous student and staff member at UVic, Lydia proposed to the Associate Dean Academic of the Humanities, Lisa SurrIDGE, that we offer a section of *ATWP 135* that was dedicated exclusively to Indigenous students. Lydia’s prediction was that such a course would provide Indigenous students³ with an opportunity to skip the long waitlists for this course, learn in a small class, build relationships and belonging with other Indigenous students, and acquaint them with Indigenous student supports, staff, and spaces on campus, all of which are most effective when introduced early in a student’s education and therefore are particularly impactful in a first-year writing course that satisfies a university requirement.

This Indigenous-specific section retained some of the standard *ATWP 135* syllabus, such as the major assignments and learning outcomes, but we also designed this course to cater more specifically to Indigenous students. For example, we included “belonging” as a learning outcome in the syllabus, held the course in the First Peoples House (a social, cultural, and academic space for Indigenous students on campus), invited many Indigenous student support staff to visit the class, and adopted a contract-grading approach to assessment. For a further discussion on the grading process for this specific course, please see Gaudet’s (2022b) article published in a previous volume of this journal.

Part Two: Gathering Data

Research Methodology

As this was and still is a pilot course, we wanted to measure the impact of this first-year writing course dedicated to Indigenous students and decided to survey the students at the end of each term. This paper includes data from three iterations of the course and the aggregated survey feedback from each. In Fall 2021, there were 14 students enrolled in the course, and 7 students responded to the

survey. In Fall 2022, there were 11 students enrolled, and 6 students responded. In Fall 2023, there were 18 students enrolled, and 10 students responded. We used a mixed-methods approach: a Likert-scale to ask about the First Peoples House, the classroom community, the instructor, contract grading, and the learning outcomes; and open-ended questions about what worked, what did not, what they wished had been covered, what we could do differently, and any other comments they had.⁴ We received Human Rights Ethics approval to survey each cohort of students. Because the instructor was one of the researchers, there was a potential for this student-instructor relationship to impact student responses. However, to mitigate this risk, the ATWP Program Administrator sent out invitations to complete the survey online, through SurveyMonkey, after the course was complete and students had received their final grades. We also ensured students that their responses were anonymous and that they could stop the survey at any time.

From these data, we have affirmed our belief that this is a successful initiative and are planning to continue to offer this course and are considering offering more sections. We wish to emphasize that the survey data is useful and impactful, but one of the reasons that we include this data here (and one of the reasons that we have chosen a mixed-methods approach) is that we are able to include and highlight the voice of the Indigenous students we seek to serve. Further, we caution readers not to treat Indigenous students as research subjects. Our intention is not to study these students and their education but rather to evaluate ourselves and the efficacy of our work through their responses.

Discussing the Survey Data: Listening to Student Feedback

The First Peoples House (FPH)

One of the main purposes of this section is to help Indigenous students feel comfortable being in the FPH and accessing its resources and facilities. We have been successful in this goal, insofar as 96% of responses strongly agree with the statement that this course helped them to feel comfortable in the FPH. In response to one of the open-ended survey questions, “What worked?” one student wrote, “I enjoyed that it was in the First Peoples House, if it weren’t for the class, I probably wouldn’t have come and I am glad I did.” Another student wrote that the course was “a gateway to feel like I had a place (the FPH) to go not only for the term but for the rest of my years here.” Students also reported that this course helped them feel comfortable accessing resources and facilities in the FPH (96% strongly agree and agree), and connecting with the staff in the FPH (83.5% strongly agree and agree).

Classroom Community

We asked students about their engagements with other students in this class, and while the majority reported feeling connected to their classmates (79% strongly agree or agree), there was not as much reported socializing or studying outside of class time (57% strongly agree or agree with the statement, “I spent time with classmates outside of the scheduled class time”). However, 91% of students strongly agreed and agreed that being in this course section with other Indigenous made them feel more comfortable in the classroom, and 93% strongly agreed or agreed that this made them more comfortable at UVic.

These feelings of comfort, security, and belonging were also expanded upon in our open-ended questions. For example, in response to the question, “What worked?” one student wrote, “I loved having the community that was created in our classroom. I felt a lot of support and love, a very safe space for me,” while another wrote, “The small class size but more importantly the community that I felt.” Another student, in response to the question, “Was there anything that wasn’t asked on this survey that you would like to comment on?” wrote, “it provided a safe, comfortable environment for me in which I gained many resources and a newfound confidence in the classroom.” The emphasis on community, safety, and love in these responses exemplify our commitments to good feelings, belonging, and care.

Instructor

Our team has been attentive to and critical of the structural power dynamics embedded in this classroom. While 100% of students strongly agree that the instructor treated students with respect, students also indicated that this course would be a good opportunity to connect with an Indigenous instructor (63% strongly agree and agree; 33% neither agree nor disagree; 4% disagree). However, when asked if they would be more comfortable if the instructor were Indigenous, the majority of students neither agreed nor disagreed (17% strongly agree and agree; 67% neither agree nor disagree; 17% disagree and strongly disagree).

These responses were expanded upon in the open-ended questions, and many of the responses contextualized the Likert-scale responses and recognized the complexity of the situation. For instance, in response to Q27 “What worked?” one student wrote, “Loren was an incredible instructor, and while I agree that this course would have been a good opportunity to connect with an Indigenous instructor, she did an excellent job and was perfect for this section. She was accommodating and

patient, and made me feel very cared for.” Another wrote, “My instructor was flexible, caring, and communicative and showed she really cared about me and my learning. She encouraged me when I was doing well and supported me when I was struggling.”

In response to Q25, “What could be done differently?” one student responded, “An Indigenous instructor would have been so much better.” Another noted, “I think it would’ve been cool to have the prof be indigenous, but Loren was super awesome. She made me feel really supported, in my learning and other troubles outside of the classroom. Which allowed me to value my time there more.” Another wrote, “I think some future students may feel more comfortable with an Indigenous teacher teaching the Indigenous course, but I didn’t have any issues with it.” These responses point to the complexity of this situation: students value an instructor who offers care and support in the classroom and also recognize that this class could provide an opportunity to connect in a meaningful way with an Indigenous professor.

Contract Grading

This course adopted labour-based contract grading (in this survey called “contract grading”).⁵ We asked students to indicate their agreement with the following statements: contract grading allowed me to prioritize learning instead of grades; contract grading is an important part of an anti-oppressive classroom; contract grading helps to decolonize the classroom;⁶ I would take another course with contract grading in the future. Student responses were overwhelmingly positive: 100% of students strongly agreed or agreed that learning allowed them to prioritize learning over grades; 94% strongly agreed or agreed that contract grading is part of an anti-oppressive classroom; 88% strongly agreed or agreed that contract grading helps to decolonize the classroom; and 100% of students strongly agreed or agreed that they would take a course with contract grading in the future. Students also mentioned contract grading in the open-ended section. In response, “What worked?” one student wrote, “The contract grading was great for me to focus more on my writing skills rather than what I think my prof wants to read,” while another wrote, “I really enjoyed contract grading because I felt it made me want to try new things which is really important.”

Learning Outcomes

In addition to our unique contributions, this course must also effectively deliver the learning outcomes of the ATWP 135 mandate. Students responded positively when asked about the learning

outcomes related to writing and research. When asked if this course prepared them for the writing and research tasks that the university demands of them in other courses, 96% strongly agreed and agreed. As one student noted, “I gained many resources and a newfound confidence in the classroom.” The survey data demonstrates that, according to students’ accounts, we have been successful in creating a decolonial approach while delivering required content.

Part of our success and what we want to share with readers is also what we learned as staff and faculty about collaboration, developing decolonial initiatives, and working in a good way. Similar to the advantages of a mixed-methods approach to our program evaluation, we believe that a mixed-methods approach to writing this paper will provide both convincing quantitative data and evocative qualitative reflections and lessons. To capture these qualitative elements, we share our thoughts and reflections on working together in a way that is relational and emergent. By doing so, we resist a prescriptive framework for collaboration and instead enact an Indigenous teaching pedagogy of non-directive, story-based learning.

Part Three: In Conversation

Locating Ourselves: How We Came to the Work

Lydia. *Tansi, Lyḍia Toorenburgh nitiḱiyigason. Tastawiyiniyaw otipemiḱiwak niya.* Hello my name is Lydia. I am a *tastawiyiniyaw*/Two-Spirit, mixed settler and Bungi-Metis person and I use they/she/he pronouns. I completed my Honours degree in Anthropology with a Minor in Indigenous Studies as well as a Masters in Anthropology at the University of Victoria. I have also worked at UVic as the Indigenous Student Recruitment Officer. At the time of writing this article, I was the Tri-Faculty Indigenous Resurgence Coordinator (TFIRC), where I was tasked with imagining and implementing decolonial initiatives, education, and advising for the faculties of Science, Social Sciences, and Humanities. Since Fall 2023, I have started a doctoral program in Anthropology and Indigenous Nationhood. I grew up on W̱SÁNEĆ territory on the Saanich Peninsula and now live on lək̓ʷəŋən territory and honour the Songhees and Wyomilth (Esquimalt) peoples who are the stewards of the land. I went through the BC public education system and was raised by two public school teachers, so I have been immersed in education as a value since birth.

In my undergraduate degree at UVic, I struggled to see my place in academia and in the institution as I found my course work often presenting a way of thinking and content that did not resonate with my Indigenous values. In the circle of Indigenous teachers and learners, I was learning quality content at the same time as learning about myself as an Indigenous person and scholar, and my place in the circle

of Indigenous education. I walked out of those classrooms with my basket full of motivation, self-confidence, and tools for decolonizing my education. Yet, when I walked into the classroom of my Social Sciences courses, I often felt like I had to choose between suspending my burgeoning Indigenous scholarship in order to meet the expectations of my non-Indigenous instructors, or to muster my energy and courage and commit to a semester of negotiation and resistance against hegemonic curriculum, pedagogy, and measures of success. It was conflicting to walk between such different worlds.

After I completed my Honours degree, I became the Indigenous Student Recruitment Officer at UVic. In this role I traveled the province and met with prospective students, families, educators, and community leaders. I began to understand just how inaccessible post-secondary education can be for Indigenous students. Much of the disconnect was in the hidden curriculum of knowing how to plan high school prerequisites, what educational programs are available, and how to apply for admission and funding. I realized that I had learned these things from my university-educated parents, but for those who are first-generation post-secondary students, how are they supposed to learn these systems? As Brayboy and colleagues (2015) explain, these challenges entering post-secondary continue once students arrive on campus as they find the “context specific” knowledge for success is “not always readily apparent” (p. 159). As the recruiter, I spent a significant amount of my time just explaining what post-secondary education is, what all the jargon means, and helping prospective students just to see that it *was possible* for them to pursue further education. While I witnessed these many barriers and challenges, I saw such amazing motivation and commitment from prospective students, it was a joy to help them cross the bridge into post-secondary education. However, as much love and care as I could put into supporting these students to enter the institution, retention and success continues to be a challenge.

In winter 2020, during my Master’s degree, I was hired as the inaugural Tri-Faculty Indigenous Resurgence Coordinator (TFIRC). While I was in recruitment, I had visions for changes I wanted to implement but it was not in my scope to affect such change. I was thrilled that the TFIRC was expected to enact change, deliver education, and ultimately move decolonization forward in the institution. Drawing on my experience as an undergraduate and graduate student at UVic as well as my experiences as a teaching assistant and staff member, I wanted to do work that would increase the success of Indigenous students, staff, and faculty and help them to have good feelings while in the UVic campus community. I saw one avenue for improving Indigenous student success was in first-year required writing courses.

At UVic, undergraduate students must complete an Academic Writing Requirement (AWR). In my degree, I was excused from this requirement due to my high grade on my BC English 12 exam so I chose not to take one of the AWR courses. Not taking this course proved to be a challenge as I needed to learn

the standards of academic writing by the very patient tutelage of my mother and the trial and error of my first-year assignments. Thinking again about that hidden curriculum, I considered how encouraging Indigenous students to take that first-year writing course in their first semester would set them up for success. However, I knew that it would need to be a positive experience as their introduction to university. I remembered my favourite class in my undergrad, the LE,NONET (pronounced "le-nong-it") course. This is an interdisciplinary class only for Indigenous students which "provide[s] students with the knowledge and skills necessary to work in Indigenous communities, with Indigenous organizations, or within campus-based academic research teams..." and offers an "overview of historical and contemporary issues facing Indigenous peoples, and an introduction to western and Indigenous research methodologies" (University of Victoria, 2023b). This was a highlight in my education where I got to meet other Indigenous students, learn from Indigenous instructors, think through the conflicts between Western and Indigenous epistemologies, and to learn in the wonderful Indigenous cultural centre on campus called the First Peoples House (FPH). The FPH is where many Indigenous support staff work and is the hub of Indigenous social programming. Unfortunately, I had heard from many Indigenous students that they did not feel comfortable going to the FPH and wondered whether they belonged there. I imagined an Indigenous-only section of the standard writing course where first year Indigenous students could find a sense of belonging with each other, in the FPH, and at UVic. I hoped to help them develop the confidence they needed to access the supports in the FPH and to navigate the broader institution. In the summer of 2021, I brought this idea to the Faculty of Humanities, which houses the Academic and Technical Writing Program (ATWP), and asked for the support of the faculty and the program to implement this initiative.

Loren. My name is Loren Gaudet. I am a settler: my mother's parents immigrated to Canada from Italy. My father's father came to Canada from somewhere in Europe—I am not sure from where, exactly. I was born in Vancouver, on the traditional, ancestral and unceded land of the Musqueam and Squamish peoples. I grew up in Victoria on the traditional territory lək'wəŋən people of the Songhees and Wyomilth (Esquimalt) peoples. After living in Toronto, the traditional land of the Huron-Wendat, the Seneca, and the Mississaugas of the Credit, and then on the traditional territories of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tseil-Waututh) in Vancouver, I have returned to Victoria.

I am an Assistant Teaching Professor in the Academic and Technical Writing Program (ATWP) at UVic. I started my job--my first tenure-track job--in July of 2021, and I was invited to take on a section of ATWP 135, a course that fulfills the academic writing requirement (AWR), that would be specifically dedicated to self-identified Indigenous students. It was described as a kind of pilot

course and would be a chance for students to get into the (often-required) ATWP 135 class without the typical waitlist while focusing on support and retention. My job would be to teach the course, adapt the course materials to this specific context, and work with Lydia to make sure the students were supported.

To be asked to teach this course was a bit of a shock to me because my first reaction was, “shouldn’t this be offered to someone who is Indigenous?” In fact, when the Director of the ATWP asked if I would take this on (citing my cover letter that outlined my experience teaching diverse student populations at the University of British Columbia), I asked them if I was in fact the best person for the job. I was concerned that this would be perpetuating colonization. But, the Director assured me that it was important to have someone who was an experienced teacher, and also because I was new to UVic, I would be in a position to learn alongside these students. And, the Director also assured me that I would have support from Lydia.

I was so nervous before I met with Lydia. I felt like I was not well prepared to do this course. I was worried that I was getting away with something, or like I had been asked to do this important work but was going to disappoint or offend. Another challenge was that ATWP 135 is a multi-section course with a common syllabus created by the course coordinator. In our first meeting, I brought this common syllabus and we went through it together. Lydia highlighted things that they thought needed tweaking, removing, or softening. We worked together to create a syllabus that emphasized belonging as a guiding principle and adhered to Indigenous academic protocols.

We talked about how weird the whole thing was--I think we were both concerned that a non-Indigenous person was taking this role. I say “I think” here, because you did not ever come out and say it, (you were only ever supportive of me), but we must have talked about it because you suggested I start the syllabus with a self-location. I did not know what a self-location was so you, generously, suggested I look up Margaret Kovach’s (2009) *Indigenous Methodologies*. I did, and I did some more reading, and then wrote my self-location and shared it with you, and this was another instance of your generosity and patience. It was really bad. You offered comments such as, “I would add the Indigenous nations whose territory these places are – that is the Indigenous way of talking about where you are from” and “I like that you included this journey, I think it will resonate with some Indigenous students. I might suggest adding a ‘so what?’ that explains why you are sharing this” (L. Toorenburgh, personal communication, August 17, 2021). I made changes to my self-location and included it at the beginning of my syllabus. It was important to me to emphasize that, “that I don’t see my role here as teaching you about Indigenous or Traditional Knowledges. My role, and the set of skills that I bring to this classroom, is to work with

you and introduce you to the knowledge-making practices of academic communities. My goals are to help you to build skills, confidence, and experience as academic writers, to introduce you to different ways of writing, and to introduce you to resources and contacts that will support you throughout your time at UVic” (Gaudet, 2022a, p. 3). This made me feel much better about this role, and that I was being transparent and honest up front.

Another addition you suggested to the self-location, was to conclude with this statement: “I’m looking forward to learning together and from each other this semester, and I am incredibly honoured to be able to do this important work with you” (Gaudet, 2022a, p.3). This experience with you editing my self-location was a foundational learning moment for me, and actually exemplified this commitment to learning alongside my students. For example, I showed my students this first draft of my self-location along with your comments when I assigned the students a self-location as their “diagnostic” writing assignment. It was helpful, I think, to show that writing is a process, writing is hard, and that writing requires community and feedback. This exchange also showed the students that you can edit in a good way, and that feedback can be a source of compassion and growth rather than correcting and asserting norms.

If You Had to Describe Our Journey, What Would You Say? What Were Your Key Priorities?

Lydia. It is so special to read your words, Loren. When you talk about the impact I have had on you and this project, and how I have supported your learning, it is very touching and humbling and lifts me up. It is sometimes hard to feel like I am knowledgeable or professional enough to be trusted with this work and I sometimes still see myself as the student among experts. But here I think is a key thread in our story knitting: humility. Each of us came with no ego or need for power; we came to the project humbly offering our skills and hoping the other person could fill our gaps in knowledge. I think that made this a quality collaboration. I felt your kind heart and your commitment to bettering the lives of students and this helped me to build trust with you. Trust in each other was so key, as we had the humility to ask for help and the trust to offer and receive help with good intentions and feelings. I tried to practice and show you what it meant to do our work “in a good way,” which is an English way to express the common Indigenous teaching of leading our work with good feelings and intentions and to engage our whole selves in the work: body, mind, heart, and spirit. When you appeared to be, or vocalized being nervous about doing the right thing, I only needed to remind you that if you are doing

this work with good mind and heart, with humility and vulnerability, and with compassion and patience, that the work will be done in a good way and the students will respond to that. And they did.

Your teaching approach is where I see your commitment to pedagogies of care come to life. Pedagogies of care is a concept that you introduced me to and the positive impacts of this approach are so clear. In an institution that can often be unfriendly and is full of overt and covert barriers for Indigenous students, it is radical to build a class environment built on personal connection and belonging. You told me a story of having a student arrive in class after having missed several classes. You shared that your response to that student was, "I am so glad you are here." Rather than punish that student for having been absent, you brought in those good feelings and demonstrated to that student that their presence is valued, they are welcome in the class, and that you see the great effort they have taken to attend. In a situation where a student might feel guilty for having missed class and overwhelmed at the prospect of catching up, you lead with kindness and create good feelings around attendance. This compassion is part of making students feel like they belong and feel safer in the classroom. If we want students to learn, then we have to prioritize well-being because we are not poised for success when we have unmet needs whether they be emotional, physical, mental, or spiritual.

Loren. Thank you for bringing up the concept of pedagogies of care. This is an idea that I first encountered through discussion with Writing Studies scholar Louis Maraj and their work with care-based assessment (personal communication). While the idea of pedagogies of care emerged in the 1980's (Noddings, 1984), much of the scholarship around care-based pedagogies is in the context of online learning, especially in relation to COVID-19 (Gibson et al. 2022; Burke & Larmar, 2021; Mehrota, 2021; Moorhouse & Tiet, 2021). These approaches emphasize the importance of empathy, community-building, and understanding as a central part of teaching. I think one of the things that we have prioritized in this project, and that you are referring to here as well, is this emphasis on care. I remember after our very first meeting when we discussed the course, you sent me an email. You wrote, "it was so good to meet you. I also wanted to thank you for taking on this course, I really feel that your heart is in a good place and that is so important in this setting" (L. Toorenburgh, personal communication, July 15, 2021). This quote perfectly encapsulates this idea of care-based pedagogy, and your willingness to centre feelings and care in this process was so formative for me. I carried this approach through to the classroom where care and belonging were centered. What this looked like for me in the classroom was being open and vulnerable with my students, and also working to cultivate a space where they could be open with me and each other.

This idea of care relates to the other foundational value that we have brought to this project, which is the idea of belonging and the importance of making clear that students belong in this course, in the FPH, on campus, and in education. One of the most impactful suggestions that you made, Lydia, was to explicitly include belonging as a learning outcome on our syllabus. We added the following learning outcome: “To help students cultivate a sense of belonging in the First Peoples House (FPH) and at UVic more broadly” (Gaudet, 2022a, p. 5). It was important to me that I made it clear to students that I was glad to see them when they came to class, regardless of how often they came. I tried to create a classroom environment where no matter when they showed up, I welcomed them and invited them to join us in whatever we were doing. This was directly in response to something you said, Lydia, when we were first meeting, where you invited me to reflect on my assumptions about what student success looks like in the context of this course. You emphasized that for some students, success might not look like getting an A, for some it could be about completing the course in a way that allowed them to focus on their work, family, community, or other priorities. And I did have this experience: one student was starting their own business while taking this course as a prerequisite for another program. They needed an environment that was flexible, accommodating, and understanding, rather than demanding consistent attendance. Because we had cultivated an environment where they could be honest about their needs and wants for this course, I could respond and help them to achieve their goal of passing the course.

Lydia. Yes, it is not realistic or useful to apply uniform expectations or measures of success to such a diverse population of students. The journey of education is different for every student and for students with marginalized identities or other such challenges, there are many additional barriers to the traditional markers of success such as A’s and full-time course load. For me, Indigenous education is about long-term investment in individual and intergenerational success. In many ways, Indigenous education is about healing the negative experiences in Western education systems that students and their relatives have had. Knowing this, when I spoke to you about teaching Indigenous students, I talked about the many different ways that success may be measured: the class size will likely be smaller but this is an asset; an improvement from D’s to C’s may be a significant achievement for a student; or a student might not get a very high grade but really enjoy their time in the class for the first time. All of this is success despite not looking like the typical measures of success in Western education. Here, I see growth and good feelings being the goals and that each student will see themselves improve their skills and see themselves as belonging in a community of learning.

Supporting success is not just about academic achievement, it is also about building up strong and resourced students who know how to navigate challenges. In high school settings, students often have a homeroom class where they return throughout the year and as such have a teacher and peers with whom they are in contact regularly. When students arrive at post-secondary institutions, particularly universities, students are left largely on their own as they travel between classes, semesters, and years. If a student desires an ongoing relationship with a mentor, they need to make their own connections to instructors and / or staff; however, I have heard from many other former students that they had gone through their program without significant connection to their department, program, instructors, peers, staff, and campus community. I ask myself, if a first-generation student were to come to campus, how would they know where to find support? If an Indigenous student comes to campus and finds people, places, and curricula and pedagogies to be unwelcoming, how would they be able to find people and places where they feel like they belong and where they are safe to be themselves? First-year required courses such as writing courses are an opportunity to regularly check in with students and to introduce them to supports, key staff contacts, and to facilitate relationship building. Such resourcing prepares them for their studies and to become more independent and confident in navigating the institution.

First-year required courses are a setting where we know we will see almost every student and therefore they are opportunities to deliver essential curriculum, like citation practices, and to inform students of key supports, like academic advising. Required first-year courses are also an opportunity to foster inter- and intrapersonal learning that will set students up to be more resourced and more system-savvy. I acknowledge that it can be challenging or impossible to build personal connections in lecture/survey-style first-year required courses like Biology 100. However, in smaller classes, such as the ATWP 135 course where we prioritize smaller class sizes, this focus on relational learning is something we should strive for. In our Indigenous section, I saw that we could develop a sort of homeroom-style environment, where students would be known by the instructor and classmates by name and where they would have a sense of home-base where they could bring their concerns and successes forward. In this way, while new students are learning the post-secondary system, they would have an instructor to whom they feel connected and to whom they can bring their questions and concerns and who knows the institution well enough to direct them to the appropriate resources and people. Sometimes students need to feel that they are seen in order to feel like they matter; to feel like there is someone who is happy to see them when they come to class and who notices if they are struggling. First-year required courses like these provide an opportunity for early identification and intervention for students who are struggling. Early identification and response to challenges is particularly important for Indigenous students who often face greater barriers, often have additional family and work

responsibilities, often do not feel safe enough to come forward to an instructor or staff member with questions and concerns, and who often do not know of the supports and allowances available to them. Loren, this is something you did so beautifully and I really acknowledge you for taking the time out of your limited 90-minute class to attend to the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical needs of the students at the beginning of each class. As you have shared with me, there were a number of instances where this homeroom-style environment and intentional investment in regular check-ins directly benefited the students and classroom environment. I commend you for making the students' wellbeing a classroom priority.

Loren. Yes! You write above that, "sometimes students need to feel that they are seen in order to feel that they matter," and this so eloquently captures the importance and impact, of this course. In one of our post-course surveys, one of the students spoke directly about the impact of being seen. She wrote, "The most impactful part about ATWP 135 was the intimate class setting and flexibility. So far it has been the only class that made me feel noticed as not only a student with struggles but as a person." This is a powerful piece of feedback that speaks to the strengths of this course.

I think that one of the ways I was able to cultivate this sense of being noticed, and I think cared for, was by starting every class with what I have been calling a "round": we sat in a circle together and each person had a chance to share how they were feeling. This practice became part of my day-to-day teaching somewhat by accident--I initially only had this planned as an ice-breaker activity on the first day of class. However, in that first round, many of the students spoke about feeling overwhelmed, having to adjust to the fast pace of university life, or being homesick. I felt it was important to make space at the beginning of every class to slow down, take a breath, and check in with ourselves and each other. Sometimes I would offer specific prompts--for example, is there anything that they are excited or worried about--but more often I would just ask students how they were doing (and I would always emphasize that there was an option to pass, which students sometimes did). As part of this round, I would also briefly share how I was feeling.

Students used the round as an opportunity to share successes, such as doing well on a midterm or having a family member or partner coming to visit, and frustrations, such as having difficulties in other classes, or feeling overwhelmed by schoolwork. But students also used this round to solicit support and guidance from one another, and as an opportunity to solve bigger problems. During one round, a student asked their peers for advice about whether it would be appropriate to share something with their non-Indigenous partner, and the group helped this student navigate this culturally nuanced situation. There were also at least two times during this

round process that students expressed concerns about their safety. In these instances, I was able to put them in touch with the relevant support people, some of whom were previously introduced in class, and others whom I was able to access due to my institutional knowledge. The small class size of this course has been crucial, because it allows for what you, Lydia, have so eloquently termed “homeroom-style environment.”

What Were Some of Your Worries and Anxieties?

Loren. My biggest worry is that I am not the right person to be teaching this course—we have both acknowledged that this course would be a good opportunity for students to connect with an Indigenous instructor, given the small class size and membership. And students definitely agreed with this in their survey responses (which we discussed above). But they also indicated that they were neutral on whether or not they would be more comfortable if the instructor were Indigenous, and many students indicated that my approach to teaching and my attitude made me a good fit for this class. This is nice to hear, of course.

I mentioned above tackling my non-Indigeneity head on, through a self-location in the syllabus, but I also had open discussions with my students in the classroom. One student explicitly acknowledged this in a survey response: “She recognized that she was a European woman teaching a class of all Indigenous students and she never pretended to be something she wasn't.” I think this response is representative of the kind of open, honest, and vulnerable communication that I had with my students as a direct result of my working relationship with you, Lydia.

Related to this idea of not pretending to be something I am not, another way that I mitigated some of my anxieties was to bring in resources to the classroom. UVic has excellent people to support Indigenous students specifically, including academic advisors, student support coordinators, student organizations, financial aid supports, and health workers. As part of my summer course prep, I reached out and invited as many people as I could contact to visit our class and introduce themselves to the students. There were many instances where I was able to put a student in contact with these Indigenous-specific resource people, who were best able to support that student to access health, housing, and/or financial support. There were instances where I was able to put students in contact with you, Lydia, so that you could take them for a coffee and chat, or answer cultural questions, like for example, where a student could smudge on campus. Having you as a resource for me and the students was a really crucial part to providing appropriate and care-based support. I think that we have done the important work of setting up

this course, and when we have the right person to take over, it will be good to pass this course on.

Lydia. I too was nervous about working with a non-Indigenous instructor, and worried how the students would feel. I imagined that if a student signed up for an Indigenous-dedicated writing course, that they would expect an Indigenous instructor and would feel uncomfortable with that not being the case. As I came to know and trust you, Loren, I felt like you were a great fit for this role. After the first round of survey feedback, I was relieved to know that the students shared my feeling. I think this feedback emphasizes that even when we as an institution lack the quantity of Indigenous instructors to teach all the courses we aspire to, we should not wait to implement these initiatives. It is possible to have powerful, positive impacts with the right allied, non-Indigenous people that can also take some of the workload off Indigenous instructors who are often oversubscribed and in junior faculty or sessional positions. What the students taught us was most important, was to have a compassionate, patient, and open-minded instructor who authentically cared about them and their learning. What you teach us all, Loren, is an example of how to decolonize your teaching practice, centre Indigenous values, and transform “ally” from noun to verb. Although decolonizing the faculties of Science, Social Sciences, and Humanities is my job, I cannot do it alone. I have relied on invested, committed, and kind allies like you to move this important work forward.

My second worry was not having institutional support. The course came together quite quickly in the summer before the first fall semester offering. The institutional stars aligned: we had an idea, an Indigenous staff support, a compassionate and skilled instructor, and administrators who invested in this initiative. This course would not have happened had the director of ATWP and the Deans of the Faculty of Humanities not supported us. I acknowledge that this is a somewhat costly course as the class size is quite small and in the second year, we had to do some targeted class recruitment to boost the enrollment numbers. However, the administrators saw the value in the initiative and were supportive of allowing you and I to tweak the common syllabus and to design our new approach how we saw fit. The role of administration in supporting these initiatives is a necessity. I commend our administration for taking this risk with us and I express to our readership that these risks are essential. It was also by the encouragement and support of the administrators that we pursued the feedback survey which has helped us to continue to revise our approach, build on our successes, and gather data that demonstrates a promising approach to decolonizing postsecondary writing programs.

Part Four: Reflections and Conclusions

Belonging is Crucial

One of the most important takeaways from this project is the importance of making an active commitment to prioritize students' feelings of belonging. Most university syllabuses have a statement about EDI in the classroom under course and/or university policies, but we prioritized belonging by making it one of the learning outcomes of this course. By keeping this concept of belonging firmly in our sights as a learning outcome, we had to take action to make sure that by the end of the course, students felt that they belonged in our classroom, the First Peoples House, at the university, and in post-secondary education. In other words, we cultivated belonging through intentional and deliberate actions—making space and taking time—rather than trying to avoid exclusion, oppression, or alienation.

Spatial Belonging

Some of the actions we took to cultivate belonging were spatial, insofar as they had to do with the space itself: where we held the class and who we invited into the classroom. For example, it was crucial that we held the class in the First Peoples House. Students became comfortable in that space simply through repeatedly accessing the classroom, walking through its halls, and visiting with staff and other students. It was also necessary that we brought representatives for Indigenous-specific supports into the classroom to meet the students and talk with them, rather than merely attaching links to resources in the syllabus or course site. In this way, exposure, proximity, access, and relationship were essential factors in cultivating a sense of belonging for our students.

Temporal Belonging

Other actions we took to cultivate belonging were temporal. Building community, fostering support, and forging connections all takes time, and one of the best things we did for our students in this class was to take that time to prioritize these relationships and really enact care-based pedagogies. Building belonging into the course as a learning outcome is a way of making explicit not only that belonging is important, but also that it is necessary to take the time to cultivate that belonging. Instead of rushing to start a lecture, it might be more important to start the class by slowing down and making space for connection and conversation. As an example, there was a class where we had a

peer-review scheduled, but after checking in with the students, it became apparent that not many came to class with a draft. Instead of writing and reviewing, we spent the class talking to each other. This was a powerful class—Loren sat back and witnessed students sharing with each other, building connections, and forming relationships. Prior to teaching this course, it may have been possible to view this moment as a failure in the classroom; it could be seen as an instructor that was unable to support their students to come prepared with a draft. However, making a decision to prioritize belonging is part of what makes a strong teacher. In that moment, it was more important to emphasize the learning outcome of belonging than it was to facilitate another peer review session. This flexibility demonstrates care, patience, and respect to the students. It also provides an opportunity to focus on belonging as a learning outcome at a time when students may not have been well positioned emotionally, mentally, spiritually, or physically to focus on another more intellectual learning outcome.

Relational Accountability, Humility, and Vulnerability

We continually returned to the importance of humility. One of the reasons that this course has been so successful is because we have not tried to do anything alone. We have recognized the strengths that we each bring to the project, and have asked for help in areas where we do not have expertise. For example, Loren's training is in Rhetoric and Writing Studies, and not in Indigenous Studies; instead of trying to teach a course on Indigenous methodologies or writing, she worked on teaching what she knew in a way that would be compassionate and supportive: how to apply academic writing conventions, how to navigate different institutional hurdles, and how to write effectively for different audiences. Where Loren had gaps in expertise, she had Lydia as an advisor and also brought in many Indigenous staff and instructors to come to the class and offer their knowledge. This work is best done in relationship and partnership.

As the TFIRC, Lydia often met with non-Indigenous people who want to engage in decolonization but do not know where to begin. This problem is very common, as many people feel emotionally moved by learning about colonization but do not know how to translate those feelings into action. Each one of us is responsible for decolonizing our personal, professional, and community practices. Some of this is individual work, like educating oneself and reflecting on one's curriculum or other such work portfolios. Some of this work is collective, like observing Orange Shirt Day and working with others on institutional initiatives.

While some of this work is individual, we do not need to work alone and we do not need to try to do everything by ourselves. In fact, we will not be as effective if we work in isolation. We encourage non-Indigenous folks to connect with other non-Indigenous folks who are on this learning journey as you can inspire, educate, and motivate one another. We also encourage non-Indigenous folks to seek out and build relationships with Indigenous educators, leaders, students, and campus-partners. There are many amazing Indigenous staff working in post-secondary institutions. We encourage those who are interested in decolonization to connect to those Indigenous staff in roles like Lydia's, and/or to advocate for the establishment of such roles. It is important to know one's own strengths and limits, and to build a network of support.

We also sincerely acknowledge how daunting and sometimes scary decolonizing work can be. At times we are immobilized by fear of offending, and sometimes we are demotivated by feelings of guilt and shame. Decolonizing requires critically examining and untangling many of the things we have been taught since birth, so it is bound to be uncomfortable. However, these feelings should not stop us from courageously moving forward. We should not wait to make change because colonial policies and practices are continuing to harm all students and particularly Indigenous and other marginalized students. We should not wait until we are sure that we can be perfect, because we will learn and improve our skills through doing the work, making mistakes, and ongoing self-reflection and assessment.

Lydia often tells the folks they work with that no one has ever achieved a completed decolonization: there is no manual; it is an ongoing process; and the work is emerging as we are doing it. Therefore, we will likely make mistakes as there is no sure-fire or universal path to decolonization. But the possibility of making mistakes should not discourage us from being imaginative and innovative with our work and should not discourage us from taking risks and being courageous with our initiatives. We delivered these three iterations of this course as a pilot and applied for Human Research Ethics to measure our success and are writing this article to share our learning. This is how we have taken a risk, evaluated our initiative, and mobilized our learning to affect change in post-secondary education. Decolonizing the institution is daunting but it is healing work. We urge our readership to consider their strengths, gather allied people, and look for opportunities to create collaborations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people and ways of knowing, teaching, and learning. We urge everyone to take risks, invest their hearts into their work, and engage in the work with good heart and mind—do move forward in a good way. The work is now, the work is emerging, the work is done together.

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Endnotes

1. Wilson's text blends two different fonts: the "main" font which denotes an "academic" style; and a different font for personal, narrative sections, addressed to his sons (p. 8). Wilson writes, "Instead of writing directly to readers, which is difficult without knowing their culture and context, I chose to write to my children. I further develop the relationship I have with the ideas through my relationship with my sons" (9).
2. In the summer, ATWP 135 is delivered as a condensed, online asynchronous course.
3. In 2023, more than 1,400 Indigenous students enrolled at UVic (University of Victoria, n.d.).
4. We have included the survey questions as an Appendix.
5. For more on the experience of using contract grading in an Indigenous-specific section a first-year writing course, see Gaudet, (2022b), "Contract Grading in an Indigenous-Specific Section of Academic Reading and Writing" published in this journal.
6. Students were familiar with concepts of "anti-oppressive classrooms" and "decolonizing classrooms" because of readings that we assigned over the term (for example, Asao B. Inoue) and discussions we held in class.

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Appendix A

Preamble to Survey

This particular section of ATWP 135 is the first ever section reserved for a cohort of self-identified Indigenous students, and we are hoping that this section will be offered in subsequent years.

The purpose of this survey is to listen to your perspective of the course: what worked, what to improve, and how it affected your time at UVic. Your feedback is incredibly valuable.

This is a completely anonymous survey. Your participation is voluntary, and you can stop the survey at any time. All results will be aggregated and anonymized.

Questions

Please indicate your level of agreement or disagreement with each of the statements below by selecting the best option which describes your experience or feelings.

Statements that can be applied to a Likert 5-point scale (1.Strongly Disagree, 2. Disagree, 3. Neutral, 4. Agree, 5. Strongly Agree)

First Peoples House

1. This section of the course helped me to feel comfortable being in the First Peoples House
2. This section of the course made me feel more comfortable accessing the resources and/or facilities in the First Peoples House
3. This section of the course helped me to connect with staff in the First Peoples House

Connections with Students / Indigenous Cohort

1. I felt connected to other students in this class
2. I spent time with classmates outside of the scheduled class time to study and/or socialize
3. Being with other Indigenous students made me feel more comfortable
4. It was important to me for this section of the course to be dedicated to self-identified Indigenous students

Resources

1. This section of the course introduced me to resources I didn't know about before
2. This section of the course helped me to access resources on campus
3. This section of the course helped me to access Indigenous-specific resources on campus

Instructor

1. The instructor treated myself and other students with respect
2. This section of the course would have been a good opportunity to connect with an Indigenous instructor
3. I would have been more comfortable if the instructor were Indigenous

Contract Grading

1. Contract grading allowed me to prioritize learning instead of grades.
2. Contract grading is an important part of an anti-oppressive classroom.
3. Contract grading helps to decolonize the classroom.
4. I would take another course with contract grading in the future.

Academic and Writing and Research Skills

1. This section of the course made me a more confident writer
2. This section of the course prepared me for the writing tasks that university demands of me in other courses
3. This section of the course prepared me for the research tasks that university demands of me in other courses
4. This section of the course and the resources to which it connected me helped me to navigate my chosen path through university

YES/NO

1. My academic writing requirement was already satisfied before I took this section of the course

Written Answer Section:

1. What worked?
2. What didn't work?
3. What could be done differently?
4. Is there anything that you wished had been covered in class that was not?
5. Was there anything that wasn't asked on this survey that you would like to comment on?