

Introduction

Introduction to the Special Section of Conference Proceedings from the 2018 Canadian Writing Centres Association/L'Association canadienne des centres de rédaction's Annual Conference

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In this special section of the *Canadian Journal for the Study of Discourse and Writing/ Rédactologie (CJSDW/R)*, we are pleased to share three articles that were originally presented at the 2018 Canadian Writing Centres Association / L'Association canadienne des centres de rédaction (CWCA/ACCR) conference in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan. This introduction situates those articles within the context of the work of other writing centre scholars and practitioners at the conference. The 2018 CWCA conference call invited attendees to share and explore ways that we, as writing centre practitioners, can engage in anti-oppressive educational practices.¹ Participants in the conference took up the invitation to explore the 2018 theme, "Politics and the Writing Centre: Inquiry, Knowledge, Dialogue, and Action," in many ways. In general, though, four main themes were evident throughout the conference: Indigeneity and decolonization, the politics of space, identity, and labour.

In this introduction, we offer a glimpse into 1) how the conference organizers arrived at the conference theme through conversation, consensus, and research; 2) how the keynote speakers asked tough questions and invited conference participants into conversations about anti-oppressive educational practices; and 3) how conference participants invited each other into these conversations by sharing their own thinking, strategies, and experiences.

Liv: I'm a white settler from Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Treaty 6 Territory and the Traditional Homeland of the Métis. My father's family came to the prairies from Norway in the early 1900s, and my mother

came to Saskatoon from Australia in the 1960s. Planning and attending this conference expanded my knowledge, challenged my assumptions, and moved me to take more informed action towards meaningful decolonization, remembering that it “is not an ‘and’. It is an ‘elsewhere’” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, 36).

Nadine: I too am a settler Canadian. My father’s family, originally from Germany and England, has been in Canada for eight generations. My mother’s family history is a little more difficult to trace, but her ancestors were primarily Scottish and Irish. I work and live in Waterloo, which is located on the traditional territory of the Neutral, Anishnawbe and Haudenosaunee people. When I travelled to Saskatchewan for the 2018 CWCA conference, it was my first time attending CWCA and my first time visiting that province. I am grateful to Liv and the rest of the organizing team for giving me the opportunity to learn about and from the important work being done in Saskatoon.

Developing the conference themes and priorities

Many conference theme metaphors spring from the host location and context. For example, Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada — on Treaty 6 Territory and the Traditional Homeland of the Métis — is often referred to as the “City of Bridges” for its seven bridges connecting the east and west sides of the city over the South Saskatchewan River. Saskatoon is also a city on the prairies, surrounded by agriculture. The bridges, wide-open horizons, and agricultural connections tend to inspire conference themes along the lines of “Building Bridges,” “Into the Horizon,” “Harvest of Ideas,” and “Fields of Knowledge.” Planners of the 2018 CWCA/ACCR conference for the University of Saskatchewan (USask) were inspired by a sense of place but in a different way, with the idea that ultimately, the work we do in educational settings should be about more than building bridges across distances and about more than looking toward the horizon. And, after all, agricultural fields and bridges are both symbols and physical evidence of colonization. The decided-upon theme, “Politics and the Writing Centre: Inquiry, Knowledge, Dialogue, and Action,” moved away from metaphor but spoke to a process. This process could unfold via a physical gathering of writing centre professionals on Treaty 6 Territory and the Traditional Homeland of the Métis. The process would see the conference as a place to ask questions, listen, gain knowledge, engage in conversations, dismantle assumptions, and, most importantly, take responsible, informed, and meaningful action.

Tuck and Yang (2012) point out that “there is often little recognition given to the immediate context of settler colonialism on the North American lands where many ... [educational] conferences take place” (3). In keeping with our desire to connect the conference to location and local context, we invited a local keynote speaker, Dr. Sheelah McLean, and a local plenary speaker, Jack Saddleback.

We believed that these local speakers' messages and the locally informed themes of decolonization, anti-oppressive educational practices, social justice, and literacy-building were not only crucial conversations to have provincially, but also nationally and internationally. At the time of drafting the CWCA/ACCR 2018 conference theme in the fall of 2017, public institutions were starting to respond to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) Calls to Action for the country to "resolve the ongoing conflicts between Aboriginal peoples and institutions of the country . . . [and] to remove a stain from its past and be able to maintain its claim to be a leader in the protection of human rights among the nations of the world" (TRC, 2015b, p. 183). The TRC's (2015a) Calls to Action pertaining to education are concrete, clear, and intended to "redress the legacy of residential schools" (p.1) – schools which were, along with other legislations, "deliberately intended by the government of Canada to wipe out the culture and language of Aboriginal People" (CBC News: The National, 2015). As Commissioner Justice Murray Sinclair noted in reference to Canada attending to educational change: "education is what got us into this mess, but education is the key to reconciliation" (CBC News: The National, 2015).

In those early conference planning conversations, we noted emerging efforts by many Canadian institutions to "Indigenize" following the TRC Calls to Action. Indigenization is "a process of naturalizing Indigenous knowledge systems and making them evident to transform spaces, places, and hearts" (Antoine, Mason, Mason, Palahicky, & de France, 2019, section 1). In post-secondary institutions, that can mean combining Indigenous and Western knowledge systems (Antoine et al., 2019, section 1). Universities are finding, however, that this bringing together is not, in itself, uncomplicated. And to date, universities' efforts have focused primarily on Indigenous hiring and recruitment, categorized by Gaudry and Lorenz (2018) as "Indigenous inclusion" rather than "decolonial indigenization," which would mean an "overhaul of the academy to fundamentally reorient knowledge production based on balancing power relations between Indigenous peoples and Canadians, transforming the academy into something dynamic and new" (p. 219)² As Antoine et al. (2018) define it, decolonization is "a process of deconstructing colonial ideologies of the superiority and privilege of Western thought and approaches" and "valuing and revitalizing Indigenous knowledge and approaches." Decolonization also means that settlers scrutinize their attitudes towards, and their positions in relation to, Indigenous Peoples and cultures (Antoine et al., 2018). Tuck and Yang (2012) point out the risks of talking the talk, but not walking the walk: "The easy adoption of decolonizing discourse by educational advocacy and scholarship [...] turns decolonization into a metaphor" (p. 2). The

CWCA/ACCR 2018 conference presented an opportunity to explore what decolonization-in-action looks like for writing centres, moving beyond decolonization-as-metaphor.

Keynote and Plenary Speakers

Because our conference themes were informed by place, we recognized the fact that Saskatchewan is the birthplace of the international Indigenous mass movement Idle No More (Marshall, 2019) and that the University of Saskatchewan has seen powerful Indigenous student leadership over several years. We invited four internationally prestigious speakers from the prairies – Elder Louise Halfe (D. Litt.), Dr. Sheelah McLean, Dr. Gregory Younging, and Jack Saddleback. Elder Louise Halfe – Sky Dancer – is a well-known and award-winning Cree poet, teacher, and recipient of numerous literary awards. She started our conference in a good way with her opening words and prayer. Keynote speaker Dr. Sheelah McLean, USask Education professor, is a co-founder of Idle No More (Marshall, T, 2019), a Carol Gellar Human Rights Award recipient, and Council of Canadians Activist of the Year award recipient specializing in anti-oppressive educational theory and praxis. Plenary speaker Dr. Gregory Younging, who tragically passed away last spring, was a member of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation in Manitoba, an Indigenous Studies professor at UBC Okanagan, as well as an author, editor, and assistant director of research for the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. Closing plenary speaker Jack Saddleback is a Cree two-spirit transgender gay man and Cultural Projects Coordinator for OUT Saskatoon. During his tenure as USask Students' Union president, Saddleback focused on advocating for a student mental health strategy (CBC News Saskatoon, 2015).

In her opening keynote, "Writing as Writing. Writing as Rioting. Writing as Righting. On the Best Days, all Three. – Teju Cole," Sheelah McLean focused on the concept of how "whiteness as dominance is reproduced in writing centres" (personal communication, May 2, 2019). McLean argued that we must address the problem of white settler colonialism before we continue conversations about reconciliation, decolonization, and Indigenization in writing centres. For example, she encouraged us to consider how writing centres reflect "settler grammars" (Calderon, 2014) in their spaces and practices, via "dominant narratives, or discourses in the texts (language, symbols, signs)" (McLean, 2018), and she pressed us to "disturb praxis" via examining how the production of knowledge is shaped by power relations and so "can never be neutral or objective" (McLean, 2018). Citing Tuck and Yang (2012), McLean illustrated this lack of neutrality, reflecting on the ways that "the use of 'standard' English, the codes and conventions of writing, along with Eurocentric topics/content and resources"

can all operate to “erase Indigeneity and normalize white settler dominance” (personal communication, May 2, 2019). Speaking to her title’s “Writing as Righting,” McLean emphasized that writing centres and educators can right wrongs by avoiding deficit theories regarding students; in other words, their focus on what is missing and wrong ignores what is right and strong in Indigenous Englishes. She concluded by inviting us to imagine and discuss interventions to decolonize the writing centre.

Late in the planning process, the conference organizers were fortunate to add Dr. Gregory Younging, to our conference program. His groundbreaking book, *Elements of Indigenous Style: A Guidebook for Writing By and About Indigenous Peoples* (see Younging, 2018b), was newly published at the time of conference planning. Younging’s talk (2018a) — to an audience of conference attendees, members of the public, and USask professors and students — focused less on his guide, and more on his observations over the years that he worked first for the Assembly of First Nations, then for the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, and finally for the Truth and Reconciliation Committee of Canada. He reminded us that, as a concept, the Doctrine of Discovery still functions systemically as part of Canada’s policies and laws, and noted a “cycle of reconciliation” in Canada which has occurred approximately every ten years since 1969. Younging reiterated the message that although decolonization and Indigenization are discrete projects, we need to work on both.

Closing the conference, Jack Saddleback’s moving and inspirational plenary, “Diverse Students, Diverse Voices,” related his story as a Cree, Two-Spirit, transgender gay man, a journey that illustrates “multiple intersections of societal discrimination” (personal communication, July 2019). His plenary outlined the differences between sex, gender, and sexual orientation, referencing the TSER gender unicorn (Pan & Moore, 2017), and explained the concept of two-spiritedness within the context of his Cree community values. He taught us that “Two-Spirit” ultimately focuses on the inseparability of cultural identity from gender identity and sexual orientation. Finally, Saddleback urged us as writing centre professionals to give tutors, students, and colleagues the “space to be unapologetic about who they are” (personal communication, July 2019).

Reflections from a Conference Participant

I joined CWCA in March 2018, just a few months before the conference in Saskatoon took place. I did not participate in choosing the conference theme, drafting the call-for-papers, or inviting keynote speakers. As a participant, though, I could clearly see that careful planning had gone into foregrounding conversations about decolonization and anti-oppression work throughout the conference.

These conversations were not limited to the keynotes. They were suffused through research presentations, panels, and round-tables at the conference. One of the papers published in this special section “Steps on the path towards decolonization: A reflection on learning, experience, and practice in academic support at the University of Manitoba,” mirrors those conversations in its structure. Here, Monique Dumontet, Marion Kiprop, and Carla Loewen each reflect on collaborative efforts between the Academic Learning Centre and Indigenous Student Centre to decolonize the work that they do. They address the “journey” towards decolonization that they have begun together both at an institutional level, but also at the level of individual relationships and subject positions.

We invited presenters from the conference whose work we hoped to feature in this introduction, but who didn’t submit formal papers to this special section, to respond to several questions about their work and the conversations and actions that the conference generated. Katja Thieme writes of her research presentation, “First-Year International Students and Research Writing: Academic Language in IN/Relation”:

My presentation focused on work that my colleague Jennifer Walsh Marr and I have done recently in our teaching assignments at UBC's Vantage College--a cohort-based program for international students that provides intensive and integrated language support. As part of our courses--which are focused on English for academic purposes and on research writing in English--we present students with scholarship on Indigenous issues. In our choices of teaching materials, we prioritize the writing of Indigenous scholars, which raises interesting language questions that we bring to the students' attention. These questions have to do with the choice—and rapid change of—research terminology in Indigenous studies, with authors' practices of self-positioning, etc. In some ways, differentiated attention to these language issues complicates our teaching of academic English to EAL students. But, we argue, in addition to the ethical imperative of teaching international students about Indigenous issues related to the land they newly live and work on, it is also a productive way to advance the teaching and research of academic English (personal communication, April 8, 2019).

Thieme pointed out that the conversations that emerged from this research panel have helped her think through important strategies for decolonization of the work of writing studies teaching and research not just in terms of course content, but in systemic, structural ways:

My field—Canadian writing studies and rhetorical genre theory—has had several scholars who have worked on questions related to Indigeneity and decolonization. But it does not have recognizable Indigenous representation—in Canada, I know of no Indigenous scholar who is doing this work. It's been a long-standing imbalance and it will take better long-term strategies to address it. The conference helped me think about those strategies (personal communication, April 8, 2019).

In one of several Roundtable Discussions that took place concurrently, “Tutoring Indigenous Students: The importance of Relationship-Building and Location,” Liv Marken and a student tutor from the University of Saskatchewan, Davis Rogers, shared their experiences arranging for on-site tutoring at their campus’s Aboriginal Students’ Centre. This arrangement was an attempt to respond to the fact that, despite a new, centralized location for the Writing Centre in the campus’ main Library and Learning Commons, few Indigenous students were visiting this space. This discussion-based session helped participants to pose important questions about their own writing centres, to move from just talking about supporting and involving Indigenous students (whether as learners or as tutors) to taking informed and consultative action.

The importance of thinking through the spaces and places in which the work of writing centres takes place was echoed through several conference participants’ contributions. In their own Roundtable Discussion on “Drop-in as Guided Writing Space,” Stephanie Bell and Joanna Holliday introduced their pilot program, which reimagined a small classroom used for drop-in sessions as a Writing Workspace for Drop-in and Guided Writing. This reimagining provided a space for students to think, collaborate, workshop, and receive guidance if and when they wanted, and brought the difficult process of writing out into the open. They asked participants in the Roundtable to think through a writing scenario through the lens of an assigned student profile in order to help us all imagine ways that we could make such a space one that is inclusive, promotes student agency, and encourages writing communities to form.

While Bell and Holliday asked us to think through how a pre-existing classroom might be used in new ways to relocate authority and agency with students, Heather Fitzgerald and student tutors Erin Selleck-Chocolate, Faolan Cole, Adiba Muzaffar, and Jourdan Tymkow asked us to re-think the politi-

cal implications of the physical space of the writing centre altogether. In “Making Space: Moving Beyond Making Do in Writing Centre Spaces,” they recounted the process of designing a writing centre space from scratch at Emily Carr University of Art and Design (ECUAD). Rather than offering a “how-to” of designing this space, however, the presenters theorized the political and material realities of such a space. They suggested that space affects not just what writing centres can do, but also how they are read. This understanding led ECUAD’s writing centre tutors to take two approaches to this re-design project. The first was to make their work and need for space visible by occupying the ECUAD atrium and other spaces around campus to host workshops. This approach “uncentred” the writing centre: when a writing centre exists in liminal spaces, it is people, rather than the physical space itself, that constitutes the writing centre. The second approach involved a strategic plan for manifesting their writing centre’s identity in their new space, which was, for a long time, only a blueprint. They did so by collaboratively writing a manifesto expressing the values of their writing centre. They suspended this statement in giant format in front of their main window, and papered the school with smaller printed versions.

If a writing centre is constituted by people rather than physical space, then the question of *who* participates in the work of the writing centre is an important, and inherently political one. Unsurprisingly, the conference theme — “Politics and the Writing Centre: Inquiry, Knowledge, Dialogue, and Action” — inspired several contributions that explored the concept of identity. Who are our students? Who are we? And how do the answers to those questions affect the work that writing centres do? Shurli Makmillen’s article in this special section, “The power of deficit discourse in student talk about writing” starts with a question: does participation in individual writing consultations help students to shift from remedial discourse in conversations about their writing to meta-cognitive awareness? The question that this article studies is, of course, premised on an assumption that writing is, as Kamler and Thompson (2008) call it, identity work; and that part of our goal in writing centre work is to create space for students to participate in scholarly conversations about their work as peers, often in ways that challenge their understanding of their role in a student/teacher binary.

In “EAL Writers and Peer Tutors: Pedagogies that Resist the ‘Broken Writer’ Myth,” also published in this special section, Amanda Goldrick-Jones and Daniel Chang contribute to the conversation about the deficit discourse that often surrounds the work of writing centres. They explore, and ultimately challenge, the notion that there is a potential disconnect between the non-directive practices that have been traditionally used in writing centres and the needs of multilingual writers. Instead, an

analysis of writing consultations suggests that tutors discuss the same topics and challenges in consultations with multilingual writers as they do with native speakers.

Other contributors to the conference also discussed productive, inclusive writing centre practices for working with specific populations. For example, Brian Hotson recounted his experience developing academic writing resources for students in China who are earning a degree from Saint Mary's University in partnership with Beijing Normal University, Zhuhai. Heather McWhinney presented a poster that outlined a three-week program in "Canadian Academic Acculturation and Literacy" designed for international graduate students at the University of Saskatchewan. In an American context, Julie Wilson presented "An Exploration of the Role of Writing Centres in Higher Education in Prison Programs," in which shared her qualitative research on the development of writing and academic supports for a college program inside a women's prison. In her Roundtable Discussion on "Translingualism in Tutoring with Deaf Writers," Manako Yabe shared both her own experiences working with a hearing tutor as a Deaf writer and ways tutors can communicate with Deaf writers. Yabe (2018) [blogged](#) about her experience at the 2018 CWCA conference, and the shared experiences between Deaf and Indigenous students that she was able to identify while listening to Sheelah McLean's keynote.

Hidy Basta's presentation on "Tutor Response to Anti-Oppressive Pedagogies: Understanding the Experience of an Administrator of Color," addressed questions at the intersections of the institutional and the individual, ranging from negotiating power as an administrator of colour to selecting tutors. In the round table "Tutor Professional Development: Writing Centre Reflective Practice, Teaching Dossier Documentation and Non-Credit Institutional Recognition," Nancy Ami discussed graduate student tutor development in the context of a collaborative pilot with University of Victoria's Career Services. Finally, Zorianna Zurba brought participants' attention to the affective and emotional labour of writing centre work, and walked them through a range of mindfulness strategies that tutors and administrators can use themselves and share with students to contribute to well-being on campus.

It was likely inevitable that, at a conference focused on "Politics and the Writing Centre," a discussion about the politics of labour — who undertakes the work of writing centres, how, and under what conditions — would emerge. Some of these discussions were explicit. For example, in a panel on The State of Writing Centres in Canada, Kathy Block suggested that strategic partnerships with academic departments to offer discipline- and course-specific writing tutoring may provide writing centres with opportunities to not only offer focused, writing in the disciplines support to students,

but also better articulate the worth of the work writing centres do — a task that is often essential in securing sustainable funding levels, particularly at institutions with faculty-based funding models. In the same panel, Brian Hotson outlined his concerns with the Canadian Association for Studies in Discourse and Writing's (CASDW) 2016 Statement on Writing Centres and Staffing. After further discussion between members of CASDW and CWCA at the 2019 CASDW conference, this statement is now in the process of being revised.

Conclusion

It is clear that participants came away from “Politics and the Writing Centre: Inquiry, Knowledge, Dialogue, and Action,” having asked important questions about anti-oppressive educational practices and having shared insights from their own institutional contexts. The articles included here were shaped, in part, by the generous conversations that took place in Saskatoon. It is now our hope that they will help us to move from conversation to action. How will each of us commit to practicing anti-oppressive pedagogy in our own writing centres, pushing back against the dominance of whiteness (McLean, 2018)? How will we take on the separate projects of Indigenization and decolonization (Younging, 2018b)? How will we consider questions of intersectionality in student identities (Saddleback, 2018)? How will we celebrate student identities, moving away from the deficit model (McLean, 2018) and toward giving students the “space to be unapologetic about who they are” (Saddleback, 2018)? We hope that you enjoy reading this issue's articles as much as we have, and that they can inspire action. We also thank the authors, anonymous reviewers, and the editors of *CJSDW/R* – Joel Heng Hartse and Sibó Chen – for making it possible to share them with you.

Endnotes

1. Anti-oppressive pedagogies are “a series of approaches which focus on how traditional educational systems and practices reinforce existing hierarchies and contribute to the disenfranchisement of marginalized students” (CWCA/ACCR Call for Papers 2018). For more information on anti-oppressive pedagogies, see Kumashiro, K. K. (2000). Toward a theory of anti-oppressive education. *Review of Educational Research* 70(1), 25-53. doi: 10.3102/00346543070001025
2. Gaudry and Lorenz's paper, “Indigenization as inclusion, reconciliation, and decolonization: Navigating the different visions for indigenizing the Canadian academy” analyzed the results of a survey

of Indigenous academics and their allies to provide insights into Canadian institutions' efforts to date (2018).

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