

ALLY-BUILDING?

Lindsay A. Morcom and Kate Freeman review the *Calls to Action* of Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) for implications for "conscious ally-building in teacher education," examination guided by the Anishinaabemowin language, the Medicine Wheel, and the Seven Grandfather Teachings," wherein "we ask what we can do to move from *niinwi*, 'we but not you,' and *kiinwa*, 'you all but not us, to *kiinwi*, 'you and us (together)'."¹ They will conclude that reconciliatory education can be accomplished through respect and love, alongside an unyielding commitment to honouring Indigeneity, speaking truth, and building wisdom."²

Morcom and Freeman start by suggesting that "the concept of reconciliation, and its societal implications if enacted, may not be fully understood by all Canadians."³ There will be those to refashion "reconciliation" into "assuaging settler guilt," and for others it will become "about engaging in projects or financial investments in an attempt to 'save' Indigenous peoples from current socio-economic and cultural realities," in both instances "reconciliation that is led by the colonizer."⁴ When led by the colonizer, they continue, "reconciliation" becomes an "artificial concept because it only scratches the surface of the deep-seated historical and current inequalities that affect our society."⁵ Moreover, colonizer-conceived appropriations of reconciliation ignore "what Indigenous teachings tell us about ethical interactions with one another," and in so doing "continue to marginalize Indigenous peoples even in a process that is meant to emancipate them."⁶ "True reconciliation," Morcom and Freeman continue, "requires us to engage Indigenous philosophies on ethical intercultural interactions, and strive to create meaningful, deep societal change where Indigenous and Western perspectives are treated with the same consideration."⁷ "To this end," the authors explain, they will "describe our professional practice working as teacher educators and ally-builders in an Indigenous education program with a high proportion of non-Indigenous students."⁸

The "professional practice" they describe took place at Queen's University, in the campus-based Aboriginal Teacher Education Program [ATEP] program. The ATEP classes were almost evenly divided between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. Because Morcom is Indigenous and Freeman is not, "We are also able to model in our work and our relationships with one another how respectful relations can be carried out."⁹

Morcom and Freeman focus on "two overarching themes" of the TRC's *Calls to Action*, the first a call for increasing "awareness of Indigenous peoples, cultures, histories, and intellectual traditions in non-Indigenous learners" and, at the same time, creating "meaningful and accessible learning opportunities for Indigenous learners," a

call requiring Morcom and Freeman to explain to students “why” such education is “necessary,” ensuring that these future teachers are “confident and well-informed enough to develop appropriate content to bring Indigenous concepts into their classrooms in partnership with families and communities, and who have the pedagogical skills to teach about them in an appropriate way.”¹⁰ The second overarching theme concerns “equality of access to education and funding,” moving Morcom and Freeman to “develop social justice-oriented teachers who can identify educational and financial inequality and have the capacity to advocate effectively for change.”¹¹

Rather than studying “social justice” or social “change” – topics one would think relevant for the second objective – or Indigenous scholarship or Canadian history – topics would think essential to have any chance of realizing the first objective – Morcom and Freeman’s “primary source of information and guidance” is “*Anishinaabewin*—Anishinaabe philosophy, worldview, culture, and spirituality,” especially focusing on “the Anishinaabemowin language.”¹² “Like other Algonquian languages,” Morcom and Freeman explain, “Anishinaabemowin differentiates between ‘we (exclusive)’ meaning ‘we but not you,’ and ‘we (inclusive)’ meaning ‘we/us and you together,’ adding: “Interestingly, the inclusive ‘we’ pronoun combines elements of exclusive ‘we’ and the second person plural ...

(1) *niinwi*

1PL.EXCL.

‘we (but not you)’

(2) *giinwaa*

2PL.

‘you all (but not us)’

(3) *giinwi*

1PL.INCL.

‘you and me/us (together)’.¹³

“Reflecting on this grammar,” Morcom and Freeman “ask how we can move from the solitudes of *niinwi*, “we (but not you),” and *giinwaa*, “you all (but not us),” to *giinwi*, “you and me/us (together),” reporting that “such reflections inform how we interact with our students and how we expect them to interact with one another.”¹⁴ Encouraging such inclusive interactions, “we put a great deal of time and energy into creating community amongst campus-based ATEP students through feasts and social events.”¹⁵ “Morcom and Freeman admit that “we privilege Indigenous knowledge” –

so much for the “same consideration” idea espoused earlier – but assure us that “we ensure that all our students feel heard in our classes, and we create safe spaces to ask difficult questions by reminding our students that we all have different experiences and knowledge bases.”¹⁶ Those “safe spaces” seem one-sided when we read that: “We empower our students to engage in change and peer education within the faculty and university by encouraging them to focus on Indigenous learning in their other classes and helping them set up awareness-raising events for other students,” thereby “creat[ing] a group where the students see themselves as *gjinwaa*,” qualifying if not contradicting their assertion that: “We model respect and instill an understanding of others as *all my relations*.”¹⁷ The one-sided emphasis of their professional practice is further affirmed when we read:

We also connect our work to the concept of responsibility to the last and next seven generations through class content, discussions, and Elder visits. We critically examine colonization and systems of privilege as they existed in the past and exist today; and we explore residential schools, their causes, and their lasting intergenerational effects. We talk about what we can do to protect future generations and ensure that they can live in mutual respect.¹⁸

Given “intergenerational effects,” one wonders whether “reconciliation” was ever anything but apologetic and aspirational – both laudatory necessary characteristics of a Truth and Reconciliation Commission – but never realistic. Some actions are unforgivable.

Undaunted (also an admirable characteristic) and implying that “intergenerational effects” can be mitigated, if by the Indigenous peoples themselves in alliance with non-Indigenous allies (as Morcom and Freeman presumably personify), the authors tell us that: “Our attempt to work [protection of future generations and mutual respect] toward this goal is informed from an Anishinaabe perspective based on the Medicine Wheel and the Seven Grandfather Teachings,” the latter of which constitute “a set of characteristics that guide us on how we can live a good life, or *mino-bimaadizjwin*,” specifically “honesty, humility, respect, bravery, wisdom, truth, and love.”¹⁹ These Seven Grandfather Teachings are associated with “the Medicine Wheel, in a three-dimensional sacred cosmology involving the four directions, the sky, the earth, and the centre,” a “visual representation of many concepts, all of which focus on interrelatedness and connectedness between various aspects of the person, of time, and of creation,” and, “as such, it represents a sacred cosmology that connects one’s internal and external worlds meaningfully.”²⁰

Noting that while “many teacher candidates enter university with very little knowledge about Indigenous peoples,” Morcom and Freeman report that “in ATEP, many of our students have focused on Indigenous Studies, Indigenous languages, or

other related subjects, and arrive at their Bachelor of Education well-versed in Indigenous content.”²¹ This fact would seem to testify to the ATEP’s success in “ensuring everyone leaves with a strong knowledge base in Indigenous content.”²² That “knowledge base” provides “an alternative narrative to that presented in most schools, where Euro-Canadian perspectives and stories are privileged” and despite “recent efforts in Indigenizing school curricula,” the authors allege that “Indigenous content in schools is still minimal.”²³ To compensate, the curriculum must include “a wide range of topics related to history, including Indigenous pre- and post-contact governance and culture, colonial/Canadian government policies and their effects on Indigenous peoples, Indigenous political organizations and policies, and residential schools and their connection to contemporary and modern social realities” as well as “recognizing and calling out stereotypical representations of Indigenous peoples, and correcting common misconceptions about Indigenous peoples.”²⁴ The curriculum must “encourage students to see the relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations and recognize that the history of Canada is a story of diverse and interwoven peoples whose stories and perspectives all have value.”²⁵ The notion of “interwoven” echoes the concept of “braiding” in the scholarship of Susan Dion.²⁶

Given the Indigenous emphasis of the ATEP program, it’s not obvious how Morcom and Freeman “ensure that our students are able to balance pan-Indigenous versus localized perspectives with a knowledge of the diversity of Indigenous languages, cultures, histories, experiences, and opinions,” a “challenge because Indigenous content in various media and in the classroom is often presented as representative of all Indigenous peoples”²⁷ – a problem the use of “pan-Indigenous” and even the term “Indigeneity” perpetuate. Morcom and Freeman claim that “there are more unrelated language families, and therefore more diverse cultures in Indigenous Canada than in Europe,” a “fact of which many of our students are unaware.”²⁸ Again emphasizing their efforts to redress the curricular imbalance they critique, Morcom and Freeman insist that their students “develop an appreciation for the sophistication of Indigenous knowledge and for the appropriate Indigenous pedagogies through which such knowledge can be explored,” an objective they “facilitate” by present[ing] our students with knowledge of available resources: these include Elders and Knowledge Keepers, as well as print and multimedia and online resources,” thereby “ensure[ng] that our students develop Indigenized media literacy and are able to vet resources appropriately for use in their classrooms.”²⁹ In service to this aim, Morcom and Freeman report that “we use a variety of strategies,” including “guest speakers, print media, videos, and online materials” while “demonstrate[ing] Indigenous pedagogies in every class so that students gain knowledge of how to employ them, and are able to see how effective they are,” emphasizing “holistic education over compartmentalized

subjects, engaging talking circles, and using traditional arts, crafts, activities, and land-based learning to explore curriculum.”³⁰

“We understand,” Morcom and Freeman write, “that it takes courage for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students to enter our classrooms,” as “both are entering a space that is imbued with a culture that is not entirely their own.”³¹ Indigenous students are entering classrooms, a concept of “the Western academy, which has historically been a place of hostility toward Indigenous cultures and knowledges,” and “non-Indigenous students, especially those of Euro-Canadian culture, are entering classrooms wherein they will “recognize their own privilege and choose to engage in the process of reconciliation.”³² Moreover, “it also takes courage to carry these teachings forward into their own future classrooms, where students, parents, colleagues, and school administrators may not welcome them,” and so “we understand that our students are brave for wanting to make positive change in education, and we commend them for it.”³³

As someone who has distinguished between “knowledge” and “information” and has emphasized the centrality of “understanding” in education,³⁴ I was heartened to read Morcom and Freeman write that “while student development begins with knowledge, the concept of understanding takes things one step further. Knowledge engages the intellect; understanding engages the emotions and allows the student to make connections between knowledge and meaning.”³⁵ For me, “knowledge” bears the signature of the knower and is aligned with what is learned studying the humanities, while “information” tends to be factual and even scientific, the former often incorporating even expressing emotion while the latter depends on the suspension of emotion. I share the authors’ association of “understanding” with “meaning,” a long-standing concept in the West³⁶ but one which Morcom and Freedom associate (only?) with Indigenous knowledge and Indigenization.”³⁷ They do not dwell on that assertion, shifting to a series of commands, including that students “must understand why Indigenous content has been excluded from the curriculum.”³⁸ Moreover, students “must realize their own agency as builders of reconciliation, and see how and why they must incorporate Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy into their classrooms, regardless of who their students are.”³⁹ Certainly one appreciates the moral fervor of commands; they may mobilize, make actionable, “knowledge” or “understanding,” but commands suspend study, the prerequisite for either knowledge or understanding.⁴⁰

A long, indeed continuing indeed painful part of human civilization, commands can begin in moral indignation but quickly become political prodding, an unsubtle sleight-of-hand revealed when Morcom and Freeman affirm their commitment to “better educational experiences and higher educational achievement for Indigenous learners” – who could oppose that? – as well as the “Indigeniz[ation of] the classroom

for non-Indigenous learners, since Eurocentric curriculum and pedagogy perpetuate existing inequities,” an injustice the authors apparently believe they can correct “by presenting alternative narratives and perspectives” as “understanding of the realities of privilege and how privilege effects curriculum content and daily lived experience,” invoking the concept of “intersectionality,” which enables students to understand that “individuals’ identities and experiences are constructed and influenced by numerous factors beyond race and ethnicity, including but not limited to gender/gender identity, sexual orientation, ability, socio-economic status, geography, religion/spirituality, and language,” understanding that evidently enables students to become “allies not just to Indigenous peoples but to all marginalized peoples.”⁴¹ Somehow the complexity that the concept of “intersectionality” supports disappears in the concept of “privilege,” a monolithic reductionistic concept that ignores intersectional stratifications – economic, ethnic, educational, gendered, racialized – now lumped together into one disparaging category.

The contradictions continue when Morcom and Freeman write that “recognizing the deep societal injustices that exist and that are recreated in our education system requires humility, particularly for those students who have grown up in a Canadian society that prides itself on a national identity of niceness and politeness.”⁴² In that sentence “particularly” would seem to mean “specifically,” as apparently it is mostly non-Indigenous students who need to be humble. And the authors ignore the (unconscious?) self-reference when they write:

As educators, recognizing our own unconscious collusion in perpetuating inequalities is hard work. Modelling this work may help support our students when they have to question their own knowledge and their own self-perceptions as Canadians and as teachers, and need enough humility to ask tough questions and to incorporate Indigenous knowledge and perspectives into their understanding.⁴³

If Indigenous students already have “Indigenous knowledge and perspectives” obviously the authors are addressing the non-Indigenous.” The “us-them” mentality that structured colonialism seems reproduced here, however inadvertently.

The imperialism - indeed militarism – associated with European colonialism is reproduced – unconsciously? – when Morcom and Freeman write: “Armed with knowledge and understanding, teacher candidates must now empower themselves to engage action for reconciliation,” an affirmation of reconciliation that locates the “hard work” only with the non-Indigenous. That is implied when the authors report that “we commonly hear from teachers who confess that they exclude Indigenous perspectives from their classrooms because of a lack of knowledge, or because they fear they will make mistakes and offend someone,” teachers whom Morcom and Freeman “are thus

complicit in the perpetuation of an oppressive system,”⁴⁴ akin to “collaborators” in the almost wartime parlance of this passage.

“We ensure” – that verb slightly chilling given this combative vocabulary – “that our students are aware that failure to act on their part cultivates ignorance in non-Indigenous learners and imposes a system on Indigenous learners that silences them and oftentimes prevents them from achieving educational success,”⁴⁵ an assertion followed by a longline of references that seem to substitute for empirical evidence. “We therefore,” Morcom and Freeman continued, “need to cultivate new teachers” – that gardening verb almost a relief – “who are prepared to teach about Indigenous peoples in a balanced, brave, and well-considered way, and who understand the need to include Indigenous content and pedagogies in both Indigenous and non-Indigenous classrooms,”⁴⁶ the adjective “balanced” contradicted by the emphasis on curricular “affirmative action,” a phrase from the United States to affirm compensation for past (specifically racial) injustice, that term preferable to the string of clichés Morcom and Freeman list but clearly do not mean.

When the authors call for “learning opportunities focus on thinking critically about the curriculum,” they do not mean “thinking critically” about the Indigenous curriculum, but only the “Western” one, a conceptual cover for insisting – or it is “ensuring” – that teachers “find ways to appropriately and deliberately include Indigenous perspectives and pedagogies in all subjects, across all grades.”⁴⁷ The authors emphasize that teachers must have “an understanding of Indigenous diversity, students must also have the ability to incorporate locally appropriate resources, as well as resources that pass their appreciation of this diversity on to their students.”⁴⁸ Then they caution their students “to be honest about what they know and do not know, and to be willing to take in new content and perspectives,” appropriate advice from teacher educators and hardly limited to Indigenous knowledge, adding that “honesty includes candid discussions about the fear of making a mistake,” ... as “teachers are also learners, and engaging in life-long learning is expected and valued,” that such “transparency includes talking about our own perspectives and how they have changed over time with new learning,” which – again – is apt advice for prospective teachers regardless of subject area but which Morcom and Freeman focus only on their cause: “instead of perpetuating Eurocentric perspectives on Canadian history and current realities ... our students will be honest and well-rounded in what and how they teach,” not laboring in “the same knowledge gaps that they suffered from in their own educational experiences.”⁴⁹ One hears echoes of evangelical Christianity in such “born again” rhetoric.⁵⁰

Then Morcom and Freeman appear to back off a bit, at least on “the spiritual aspect of teacher education,” reporting that “while our courses involve Indigenous

spirituality and ceremony, we never oblige anyone to participate in this aspect of our teaching.”⁵¹ I’m unsure why, unless “unconsciously” they realize they’ve been “in church” all along, reiterated when they substitute for any explicit “spiritual aspect” their secular one, “show[ing] respect for Indigenous peoples and be[come] agents of reconciliation by knowing about, understanding, and doing something about Indigenous concerns and societal injustices,” an “act of honouring is holistic; we take into account the realities of the past and present, but think about how we can move forward into a better future.”⁵²

The research assistant - Anton Birioukov-Brant – who summarized this article judged it “simplistic,” relying on “rather cliché concepts (e.g., Medicine Wheel, 7 Grandfather Teachings, etc.),” something he found “surprising,” given that the article repeats “fairly well-known and almost taken for granted practices of teaching Indigenous education (e.g., discussing White privilege, land-based learning, historical analysis of colonization, Indian Residential Schools, etc.),” concluding that “the authors do not posit anything particularly new or innovative in this work.” My complaint is the contradictory character of the depiction – claiming to balance the curriculum when “Western perspectives” are ignored or only disparaged - that leaves this reader wondering how “allies” can be enlisted when non-Indigenous students are subjected to such aggressive tactics.

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ENDNOTES

¹ 2018, 808.

² Ibid. On love and reconciliation, see Jales Coutinho 2023.

³ 2018, 810.

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ If both Indigenous and Western perspectives are both “treated” within “Indigenous philosophies” it’s not obvious how doing so constitutes according each the “same consideration.” Ensuring that Indigenous and Western perspectives are treated the “same” would require a third perspective distinct from either: perhaps a new-immigrant perspective, one from Asia or Africa? And “assuaging settler guilt” and economic intervention – the instances Morcom and Freeman provide – hardly represent the entire spectrum of “Western perspectives.”

⁸ 2018, 810.

⁹ 2018, 811.

¹⁰ 2018, 812-813.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² 2018, 815.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ 2018, 815.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ 2018, 815-816.

¹⁷ 2018, 816.

¹⁸ Ibid. Of course, responsibility is also a central concept in “Western perspectives.” For a recent treatment see Spector 2023.

¹⁹ 2018, 816. These show up, of course, throughout “Western perspectives.” On occasion even colonialism was animated by “good intentions” (see Hare and Barman 2006).

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ 2018, 818.

²² Ibid.

²³ 2018, 818-819.

²⁴ 2018, 819.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ See research brief #2. See also the Curriculum Studies in Canada website index for other references to Dion and “braiding.”

²⁷ 2018, 819.

²⁸ Ibid.

²⁹ 2018, 820.

³⁰ Ibid. Holistic education is a “Western perspective” as well; see, for example, Miller 2019.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Ibid.

³³ Ibid.

³⁴ Pinar 2019, xiv n. 9, 39 n. 217.

³⁵ 2018, 821.

³⁶ For example: https://www.ted.com/talks/viktor_frankl_why_believe_in_others

³⁷ Ibid.

³⁸ Ibid.

³⁹ Ibid.

⁴⁰ Pinar 2019, 15.

⁴¹ 2018, 821-822.

⁴² 2018, 823.

⁴³ Ibid.

⁴⁴ 2018, 823.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ Ibid.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

⁴⁹ 2018, 824-825.

⁵⁰ <https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/2020/july-august/steven-lawson-new-life-christ-born-again.html>

⁵¹ 2018, 825.

⁵² Ibid.