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Ensemble mentorship as a decolonising and relational practice in Canada

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Ensemble mentorship as a decolonising and relational practice in Canada

Abstract

Inspired by collaborating on a shared vision of reconciliation, three authors explore ethical relationality and the practical ways in which their *heterarchical* ensemble mentorship serves to decolonise and advance a shared vision of reconciliation for university teaching and learning. As Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, we are buoyed by those developing decolonising and Indigenising strategies in formerly colonised regions. Seen as a promising interruption to a neoliberal approach to education, the authors embrace the possibilities of imagining and creating an ethical space in universities where relationality is prioritised in service of social justice. While the complex nature of reconciliation within a Canadian context begets tension and highlights what are often conflicting value systems within academe, we maintain that innovations in teaching and learning are possible in what is now a globally disrupted terrain as students, faculty, administrators, and university leadership contend with the unknown, encounter collectivist Indigenous traditions, and tentatively explore decolonisation as an ethical avenue towards inclusive and empowering education. In imagining what is possible, we build upon Indigenous knowledge traditions and the work of leadership studies scholars to propose 'ensemble mentorship' between students and faculty as a collaborative and decolonising teaching and learning practice.

Practitioner Notes

1. Educators recommend ethical relationality viewed through an Indigenous lens as an alternative to the traditional hierarchical mentorship model typically adopted in universities through the proposal of an ensemble mentorship model.
2. Decolonisation is a prompt for ensemble mentorship that invites diverse membership into difficult conversations employing dynamism, collectivism, heterarchical, and de-centeredness as principles in a collaborative approach to mentoring.
3. Diverse voices, in our case Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators, can be intertwined through a process of *métissage* where space is made for reflective and telling insights.
4. Educators who share a passion for social justice, in our case a shared vision of Indigenous and non-Indigenous reconciliation, are propelled to find a more humanistic form of higher education through creative synergies.
5. We uphold and value the influence of Indigenous knowledge traditions as a humanising force within higher education.

Keywords

Decolonisation, mentorship, academic collaboration, higher education, Indigenisation

Something life-affirming in diversity must be discovered and rediscovered, as what is held in common becomes always more many-faceted – open and inclusive, drawn to untapped possibility. (Greene, 1993, p. 17)

Introduction

As global citizens attempt to navigate and mitigate rising racial tensions amongst alarming pandemic rates, we three authors find ourselves confronted with the task of situating ourselves in relation with the rest of humanity. We ask ourselves if advancing social justice goals of reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada is even possible when held alongside the massive forces of economic and political interests that seemingly outweigh human interests. We recognise the stark and disturbing realities of compassion fatigue and the preponderance of fear-induced decision making, yet we refuse to let go of hope. Our own ensemble mentorship is a source of inspiration that gives us the strength to ask, discuss, and envision what we might learn from our experiences of advancing reconciliation during these challenging times to imagine a brighter future for all (Crul et al., 2020, p. 21). As educators working within post-secondary settings, we offer a glimpse into our own ensemble mentorship and the ways in which it disrupts eurocentric norms and, therefore, settler higher education.

We are a collaboration of Indigenous and non-Indigenous educators living in Canada. Michelle Scott (Mi'kmaw-English/Irish) is the Director of Indigenous Initiatives at a small liberal arts university (St. Mary's University) and a doctoral student in curriculum studies. Sulyn Bodnaresko (Cantonese-European settler) is a doctoral student researching first- and second-generation Canadians in truth and reconciliation with Indigenous peoples, and Yvonne Poitras Pratt (Métis) is a faculty member, Director of Indigenous Education, and Michelle and Sulyn's doctoral supervisor at the Werklund School of Education, University of Calgary, Alberta, Canada. We are drawn together in ethical relationality (Donald, 2012; Ellis, 2007) by our commitment to the national aims of reconciliation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRC], 2015), and our relationship is enriched by our convergent and divergent positionalities and shared curiosity of how educators and education can contribute towards positive social change – both for students in the moment and more broadly at the societal level.

Universities around the world take a variety of approaches to mentorship that are heavily influenced by their national contexts and value-laden indicators of success (de Janasz and Sullivan, 2001). For instance, there is a tendency in American higher learning settings to adopt industry standards that require evaluative frameworks of core competencies, wherein “a clear structure...can...be used to continually evaluate the effectiveness of the mentoring programs” (Sanyal, 2017, p. 151). The impact of the American approach has evolved to Supplemental Instruction-Peer Assisted Study Sessions (SI-PASS) wherein upward trends in standardized exam scores and labour market indicators are lauded as the ultimate expression of student success (Malm, Bryngfors, and Fredriksson, 2018; Lund University, 2021). Although such approaches assume that the more ‘difficult’ courses are those requiring mastery of highly technical skills, such as first-year engineering courses, there is recognition of the value of diverse voices and skill levels within a collaborative learning model (Lund University, 2021).

In the context of our research-intensive Western Canadian university, the supervisory relationship is set by the institution and is premised on a hierarchical model. Within these formalities, we are deliberately prioritising an Indigenous ethos of collectivism that privileges relationality. In working towards reconciliation that seeks significant shifts in mainstream awareness and understanding of

Indigenous perspectives, we redefine what a ‘difficult’ learning environment entails. In this way, we move beyond the confines of an individualistic, task-oriented collaboration towards a collective model that upholds Indigenous principles of interconnectedness and reciprocity moving towards an ethos of shared responsibility. Working with these principles as fundamental to envisioning a better world, Yvonne invited Sulyn and Michelle to imagine a decolonised mentorship model with her. In welcoming them into a heterarchical relationship to do this work, she employed an experiential pedagogy whereby our individual ideas coalesced to become shared understandings.

This work represents our emerging understandings of mentoring that privileges Indigenous principles within a relational approach. We bring our trio of voices to re-imagine ensemble leadership (Rosile et al., 2018) as an ensemble mentorship collaboration and ask that you bear witness to its struggles, its triumphs, and its wish to rise above the waves of racism, apathy, and distortions of truth. In the context of colonial nation states that have deliberately suppressed Indigenous knowledge traditions, we advocate for a de-centering of eurocentric ideals and norms and invite you to do the same.

Reconciling our Canadian mentorship models

We define ourselves as ensemble mentors, working collaboratively to learn from and with each other, valuing each other's positionality in dialogue with our heterarchical relationality. In this model, we propose a dialogic, heteroglossic way forward for reconciliation within decolonising projects, one that silences no voice, and where all must be heard to be healed. Although this case study is set within Canada, we feel it is readily adaptable to other eurocentric contexts. While we are focusing on reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, our experience is part of larger, necessary conversations between those who were and are colonised and colonising. These dialogues are further complicated by intersections of class, gender, and sexuality positionality/ies; despite these challenges, we are morally compelled to proceed.

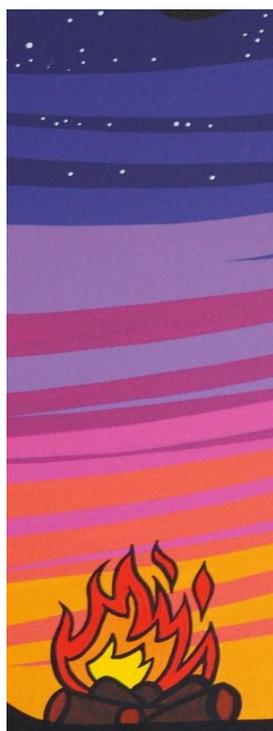
The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (2015) sees reconciliation as “establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country” (TRC, 2015, p. 6). The TRC’s final report recognises that the settler-colonial violence of nation-building in Canada has caused much destruction and that “the perpetrators are wounded and marked by history in ways that are different from the victims, but both groups require healing” (TRC, 2015, p. 5). For Indigenous peoples, engaging in this process means revisiting experiences of trauma (Antoine et al., 2018): for some, learning about the ways in which settler-colonial violence has impacted their lives, and, for others, becoming open to forgiveness. For non-Indigenous Canadians, reconciliation is also an intensively emotional process as they are asked to gain in-depth understandings of their own relation to Indigenous peoples and the impacts of colonisation, including recognising settler privilege and challenging the dominance of western worldviews and approaches (Antoine et al., 2018). Animated by these moral imperatives, we explore the potential of ethical relationality (Donald, 2012; Ellis, 2007) and the practical ways in which our heterarchical (Rosile et al., 2018) model of collaboration serves to disrupt the shared colonial landscape of higher education teaching and learning. By presenting our storied ‘ensemble mentorship’ model in a non-linear fashion, we elevate inter-connectedness as a generative, urgently needed, and promising way forward.

In this article, we reflect on our ensemble mentorship and offer what we are learning about collaboration while working within a shared vision of reconciliation and imagining of what might be possible (Greene, 1995; Poitras Pratt, 2020b). We are inspired to present our experiences,

reflections, and images through a sampling of métissage, which is a decolonising praxis that welcomes diverse voices (Donald, 2009/2012; Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009). Acknowledging the challenges that our shared vision for ensemble mentorship in reconciliation faces to gain credence in these tumultuous times, we assume the position of learners who care enough about the reconciliation process to remain committed to the work despite its often-contentious reception within an ever-shifting political landscape (Alfred, 2012; Donald, 2009; Simpson, 2017; Starblanket, 2016; Tuck and Yang, 2012). We find reassuring resonance with Oglala Lakota scholar, Linc Kesler, Director of University of British Columbia's First Nations House of Learning, who asserts we should be looking for signs of improved relations between groups as indications of reconciliation instead of a totalising end product (as quoted in Hamilton, 2017); notably, our Indigenous, non-Indigenous ensemble mentorship strengthens our resolve to not only seek, but prompt, telling signs of bettered relations.

In what follows, we invite you into our ethically relational space. We begin our dialogue with the important, ongoing process of critical self-reflection to authentically situate (one)self-in-relation (Graveline, 1998) to the global project of colonialism. This requisite step precedes the complex and messy work of seeking interconnections and shifting towards a more humane approach in teaching and learning that privileges people over profit. We chronicle our own and collective "becoming" (Richardson and St. Pierre, 2017) through the writing and practice of ensemble mentorship encouraged by the vision of a more holistic quest for knowledge.

Figure 1: Kevin Peeace (2020) Untitled¹



Michelle: Using a central metaphor of a fire, I welcome students, faculty, and community members to “come as they are” to what I call the decolonising fire. Tracing the roots and routes that bring them to the fire are the first foundational steps in making visible our multiple positionalities and perspectives as it relates to settler-colonialism in Canada as we look towards our personal and collective paths of reconciliation.

Yvonne: As a university educator of Métis ancestry, I bring my identity to the forefront in my teaching role. In bringing my authentic self to learning spaces, I regularly explain why it is that I am doing what I am doing, so that learners can see the logic of a decolonising perspective. I also tell students that “they are my hope, our hope, for a brighter future.” To me, decolonising and working together on shared aims, such as reconciliation goals, are deeply humanising practices.

Sulyn: Although a settler, I am often misidentified as being an Indigenous person. Sometimes this is a beautiful mistake that makes me feel welcomed and fully human, and sometimes it leads to interactions that denigrate the core of my being. Yvonne has often asked me what brings and keeps me in this difficult work of reconciliation; my answer has always been that I can't envision any other path for myself.

¹ Artwork used with permission of original artist Kevin Peeace. See artist website: www.kevinpeeace.com

Ensemble of decolonising, Indigenising, and collaborative practices

Within the context of higher education, administrators and educators are recognising that decolonising learning spaces requires more than the tokenistic “adding on” of Indigenous content (Battiste et al., 2002; Gaudry and Lorenz, 2018; Poitras Pratt and Danyluk, 2017). Aligning with Gaudry and Lorenz (2018), we advocate for an authentic decolonial Indigenisation approach, whereby eurocentric assumptions and core values animating post-secondaries are identified and challenged. The primary questions lying at the heart of this work ask – are universities structured to solely produce individuals intent on the accumulation of personal wealth and privilege? Or, is there growing recognition of a need to educate for a more pluralistic and ethical citizenry? The answers to these essential questions have historically privileged eurocentric worldviews where economic and military interests are glorified and ultimately serve to replicate a colonial status quo. We maintain that the current global challenges present an opportunity to re-think what our society, and higher learning institutes, value, in what appears to be profits over humanity. In our quest to extend the dialogue on the possibilities and constraints of adopting collaborative ways as a form of decolonising the traditional doctoral supervisor-supervisee relationship, we honour the influence of Indigenous knowledge traditions as a humanising force.

Given the persistent and detrimental impacts of a colonial past on the contemporary lives of First Peoples (Battiste, 2013; Schissel and Wotherspoon, 2003), including a justifiable mistrust of educational institutions, we illustrate how relationship-building among Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in Canada requires a moral commitment to advancing social justice (Brown, 2005; Cipolle, 2010; DePaola, 2014; Gorski, 2011; Shirley, 2017). Furthermore, in the case of reconciliatory efforts, an ongoing collective approach where truth-telling is the foundation of relations is imperative (Absolon, 2019; Toulouse, 2018). From a pedagogical perspective, dynamic and relational mentoring requires a thoughtful and compassionate approach as non-Indigenous learners encounter their own “epistemologies of ignorance” (Frost-Arnold, 2015), a sense of “settler-shame” (Koelwyn, 2018), the reality of ongoing discomfort (Boler and Zembylas, 2003), and what Aitken and Radford (2018) term a “resistance and stumbling forward” (p. 40). In confronting a colonial history of hidden truths, broken promises, illegal activities, and moral disregard for the First Peoples of Canada (Davis and Shpuniarsky, 2010; King, 2003), those who were previously unaware of these hard truths can experience shock, guilt, anger, disbelief, and shame. For Indigenous peoples, these truths often hit hard and close to home (Cote-Meek, 2014; Poitras Pratt and Hanson, 2020c). In this space of strong affective and interpersonal learning, many educators, including ourselves, feel compelled to do everything we can to ensure history does not continue repeating itself. As Cote-Meek (2014) reminds us, in this space and in these times, we must do better.

We are buoyed by higher education institutions across Canada who are developing decolonising and Indigenising strategies (Archibald, et al., 2010; Cote-Meek and Moeke-Pickering, 2020; Kirkness and Barnhardt, 2001; Kovach, 2009; Universities Canada, 2015). Sharing the truths of Canada’s past is a monumental educative undertaking rife with learners’ strong emotional reactions as they come to understand that colonial truths and narratives are laden with “white supremacy, patriarchy, neoliberalism, and other technologies of domination” (Grande, 2018, p. 172), and that these ideas have shaped parts of their identity. In recent years, Indigenous and allied scholars have worked to disclose hard truths and examine the negative outcomes associated with a colonial past through a process known as decolonisation (Battiste, 2013; Held, 2019; Madden, 2019; Simpson, 2017; Smith, 2012; Tuck and Yang, 2012). We concur with teacher-educator and curriculum scholar Brooke Madden (2019) that pedagogy and practice alone does not constitute reconciliation; thus, we strive to adopt an ethical position of transformative praxis grounded in critical understandings (Freire,

1970) and “actionable deeds” (Samson, 2017). Said otherwise, as a trio ensemble mentorship of critical scholars, we are collaboratively striving to decolonise (erode eurocentric hierarchy of mentorship) and Indigenise (meaningfully advance Indigenous ways of knowing, being, and doing in our work together) as practical and concrete actions of reconciliation; thereby, building and strengthening Indigenous-non-Indigenous relations to benefit our children and future grandchildren.

Internationally acclaimed Maori scholar, Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012), has focused her scholarship on advancing practical ways that we might enact decolonising research through a series of 25 projects. Her influential body of work has impacted multiple disciplinary and professional sectors across the globe by challenging previously unquestioned colonial assumptions. We find her projects of reclaiming, revitalising, and sharing especially salient for the ways in which Indigenous principles can be meaningfully introduced to disrupt the traditionally hierarchical supervisor-supervisee relationship. In a recent article examining how decolonising must extend further than research methodologies, Canadian settler scholar, Mirjam Held (2019) argues for Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars to co-create a “multiparadigmatic space that is not only emancipatory and culturally adequate, but supports the radical changes needed to advance true decolonisation” (p. 10). Held (2019) maintains that the decolonising of universities must be structured as “a mutual endeavor that involves the formerly colonised and the former coloniser [in] an equitable collaboration” (p. 11). We see decolonisation as the prompt for ensemble mentorship that invites diverse membership into difficult conversations that hold space for the promise of realising equitable relations.

In exploring the challenges of collaborative efforts within a university setting, Native American scholar Sandy Grande (2018) raises the question of “What kinds of solidarities can be developed among marginalized groups with a shared commitment to working beyond the imperatives of capital and the settler state?” (p. 51). In her article, *Refusing the University*, Grande (2018) questions whether the university, as an “arm of the settler state” (p. 47), is capable of valuing relationships that are committed to collectivity, reciprocity, and mutuality. She asserts, “perhaps one of the most radical refusals we can authorize is to work together as one” (Grande, 2018, p. 62). With a national history of dark truths exposed, and many people either unwilling or unable to walk away from these newly acquired truths, allied Canadian scholars such as Paulette Regan (2010) are calling for collaborative efforts as the way forward in the work of reconciliation. In these times of racial unease, exacerbated by pandemic conditions, an ethos of collaboration is a promising interruption to a neoliberal-dominant approach in postsecondary education and that is why we formed this heterarchical mentoring ensemble – and why and how we offer our voices as 'evidence' in this process.

***Yvonne:** I have witnessed and lived through the devastating impact of deliberately destructive colonial strategies on my own family members (Poitras Pratt, 2020a) and, to add insult to injury, I have also learned of the ways in which colonisers cast us in the role of rebellious traitors deserving of mainstream hatred after they made claims on and appropriated our homelands (Adams, 1975; Teillet, 2019). Sadly, many Métis people have taken these damaging colonial lessons to heart and have come to believe them. I bring these truths and realities into all aspects of my academic role and seek ways to share these realities as collective truths of our nation.*

***Michelle:** My own identity as a Mi'kmaw woman alongside family members and kinship ties in Ktaqmkuk (Newfoundland, Canada), is still undergoing violence and attempted erasure in contemporary times through the adoption of a colonial 'recognition' membership system that is contested, divisive, and devastating. Acts of (re)clamation, (re)storying, and resurgence are necessary disruptions that I attend to in my scholarship and teaching practice. In sharing my story, I invite others to reflect on and begin their own decolonising journey.*

Sulyn: *My contestation of colonial logics and powers stems from a deep knowing that has accrued through years of listening, discussing, and critically reflecting in university classrooms through multiple degrees, universities, and countries. Observing the inequities and powerplays animating international relations proves to me the need to decolonise, learning the truths and powers of Indigenous Nations in my homeland teaches me the strengths of Indigenisation, and love for all my relations spurs me towards meaningfully advancing truths and reconciliation.*

Calling for an ensemble of ethical collaborators

A cadre of influential scholars is already embracing the possibilities of imagining and creating an ethical space in universities (Donald, 2012; Ellis, 2007; Ermine, 2007; Wilson, 2008) where relationality is prioritised and collaboration is inherent. Papaschase Cree scholar, Dwayne Donald (2012) articulates, “Ethical relationality is an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to understand more deeply how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other” (p. 535). We find much hope for social change in publications such as *Dissident Knowledge in Higher Education* where distinguished American educator and scholar Peter McLaren (2018) calls on “citizens and academics to live up to our responsibility, recognizing that the struggle within the university mirrors the larger struggle for a democratic and just society and, ultimately, a definition of our humanity” (as cited in Spooner and McNinch, 2018, p. xxx). Social justice educators, Marc Spooner and James McNinch (2018), working at the University of Regina in Saskatchewan, Canada, issue a challenge for all to join the longstanding efforts of Indigenous scholars, leaders, and activists: “it is time for the privileged to join with the many already aware, already in the struggle for freedom, dignity, and survival” (p. xxxi). Our ensemble mentorship collaboration is representative of one such response to this clarion call.

At the same time, we acknowledge the western academy as a fixed and hyper-competitive space where individualism and eurocentric ideas of progress reign supreme. Correspondingly, notions of mentorship reflect these tenets, and in this stratified space, the “traditional forms of mentoring are hierarchical, and commonly involve an older, more experienced person supporting someone less experienced” (Paasse and Adams, 2011, p. 215). Upholding our commitment to social justice while recognising the realities of the traditional academic structures and norms wherein we work and study, we ask: “What can this meeting place, reframed as an ethical relational space (Donald, 2012; Ellis, 2007; Ermine, 2007), look like, sound like, and feel like where Indigenous and non-Indigenous people encounter one another in speaking their truths? The artistic representations throughout this piece illustrate how our individual voices have come together to portray our shared and diverse understandings.

Yvonne: *The importance of trust must be carefully considered before you start the work of decolonising. If trust is not earned, hard lessons cannot be learned. In my teaching practice, I have seen how tenuous the connections are when students feel forced to learn. I have also witnessed how transformative the learning process can be when lessons are moved from the head to the heart. Trust makes these moments possible. As a Métis faculty member, I am also working to earn the trust of Indigenous knowledge-keepers who have every right not to trust learning institutions but are nonetheless placing their trust in me to do the right thing as I invite them into the academy as co-instructors.*

Michelle: *I have found that brave spaces can be opened up in the academy when relationality is privileged and the requisite time (not linear time) is taken to centre relationships. I incorporate*

circle processes from an Indigenous pedagogical framework to welcome all voices of participants to be heard at my metaphorical fire from the very beginning. Who is present shapes the circle, and in calling in deep wisdom practices and ethical relationality, the space is imbued with a sacred trust.

***Sulyn:** Collaborating with Indigenous and allied colleagues is an entirely different experience from the western notion of achieving through solitary toil. In the former space, relationships are not fostered to complete a goal; rather, developing and sustaining relationships IS the goal. The idea is less about determining a singular truth, and more about gaining wisdom from hearing each other's truths. These ways of being are as ancient and long as peoples have been on these lands. Learning and being in these ethically relational ways brings me peace, resolve, humility, and depths of understanding as I have never experienced in eurocentric academic spaces.*

Imagining an ensemble of new relations

Amongst those calling for a new approach that includes both decolonising and collaborative ways are New Mexico University scholars Rosile, Boje, and Claw (2018). Working from a management perspective, these scholars honour and build upon the “time-tested model of a more relational and collectivist view of leadership” emanating from Indigenous traditions (p. 307). Their “ensemble leadership theory” (ELT) is comprised of collectivist, dynamic, decentered, and heterarchical principles, whose relational elements prove distinct from classical leadership models:

[in] relational models of leadership, which assume that leadership is co-created in the moment by the interaction of individuals. We position ELT . . . as clearly a relational model of leadership, yet with a twist: the relations in question are not typically between individuals but rather among all, in a social, collectivist process. (p. 308)

A collectivist orientation holds the enduring belief that “the good of the group is more important than the good of the individual” (p. 310) and securing justice for all is at the heart of this mindset. The dynamic element of ensemble leadership posits that “meaning is co-created in the moment by the interaction of the parties involved” (p. 310) and is aptly reflected in traditional Indigenous storytelling traditions that are “non-linear, and more open-ended and ambiguous” (Rosile, 2014). The decentered aspect connects to leadership’s “fluid and flexible nature” in that “any point in the system can become the new focus” and that there are multi-centered structures interacting to make space for necessary change (Rosile et al., 2018, p. 311). Lastly, the heterarchic aspect emphasises that there are multiple hierarchies interacting alongside “the shape-shifting ability of the community to morph into hierarchy or into flatter more egalitarian models” (p. 311), as the situation requires. These four principles are germane to how we understand our ensemble mentorship as an organic and evolving collaboration.

In prioritising the process of relationship-building welcoming all relations, ensemble leadership provides a model for how we might imagine a more collaborative and dynamic approach to mentorship focused on making steps towards reconciliation. We felt that this approach provided us with the strength of a collective to challenge euro-centric notions of what constitutes “difficult” learning or standards of excellence within the academy. By working as a collective, we hope to erode the hierarchical structure of the academy and introduce an element of dynamism and responsiveness to relationship-building and shared purpose. As one of the more influential voices in how to revolutionise the staid expert-protégé model, the words of Brazilian educator and activist Paulo Freire (1970) resonate across the ages to contemporary times:

The raison d'etre of libertarian education, on the other hand, lies in its drive towards reconciliation. Education must begin with the solution of the teacher-student contradiction, by reconciling the poles of the contradiction so that both are simultaneously teachers and students. (p. 45)

Herein, we are proposing that ensemble leadership theory is appropriately applied as a decolonising collaborative mentorship model, which we call ensemble mentorship. We envision it as a re-imagination of how teaching and learning can be transformed as faculty, students, and traditional knowledge-keepers come together, share ideas, and imagine new relations in mentorship (de Janasz and Sullivan, 2004; Higgins and Kram, 2001; Mandell and Herman, 2009; Sinclair and Pooyak, 2007). In this ethical space, all teach and all learn.

Figure 2: Kevin Peeace (2020) Untitled



Sulyn: *I wonder if sceptical readers are thinking, “yeah, nice, but...” If this is running through your mind, perhaps you can try ‘thinking’ about it a little less, and ‘feeling’ it a little more. Not in a sappy way, but in the same way that a presenter ‘feels’ the room or an educator ‘senses’ what their students need to better understand a new concept. My experience in ensemble mentorship with Yvonne and Michelle is teaching me to give more weight to my intuition and spirituality, putting them closer in balance with logic when making considerations. We have to shift our ways of thinking in order to truly reimagine higher education.*

Yvonne: *In the chaos of jobs, families, and life in general, the need to continually shift our focus and to privilege one situation over another is constant. We argue the same can be held true of*

learning spaces – the negotiation of what is best for the group is what drives a collectivist approach to teaching and learning. In this approach, we are each responsible to one another and in mentoring, and being mentored, our roles shift as needed to address changing priorities and to privilege the unique gifts we each possess.

Michelle: *There is a natural rhythm that emerges when we come together and welcome the whole person that each of us brings to our ensemble: the physical, intellectual, emotional, and spiritual aspects are also heterarchical. As scholars, we came together to collaboratively write this article, arguably, an intellectual exercise. Yet, sometimes our spirits are weary, and we tend to them: lighting a smudge, calling on wise ancestors to guide us one moment, the next coming back to our writing; the theoretical, the practical. Knowing full well that it IS all related, and that we are co-creating something to offer up as knowledge production in the academy.*

Prioritising and caring for ethical relationships in ensemble mentorship

The act of caring for one another is a well-recognised trait of strong educators (Noddings, 2013); yet, how do we care for an idea, a vision, a societal aim? Professor of law at New York University, Carol Gilligan (2011), shares insights into identity and moral development that considers how we may work as a collective in realising societal aims: “The ethics of care starts from the premise that as humans we are inherently relational, responsive beings and the human condition is one of connectedness or interdependence” (para. 2). The definition she offers around the ethics of care is worth sharing at length:

As an ethic grounded in voice and relationships, in the importance of everyone having a voice, being listened to carefully (and on their own terms) and heard with respect. An ethics of care directs our attention to the need for responsiveness in relationships (paying attention, listening, responding) and to the costs of losing connection with oneself or with others. Its logic is inductive, contextual, psychological, rather than deductive or mathematical. (Gilligan 2011, para. 4)

In seeing these ideas emerge within mainstream scholarship, we remind readers that the application of an ethics of care shares several tenets of longstanding Indigenous principles or values. For Verna Kirkness and Ray Barnhardt (2001), the four R’s of respect, relevance, reciprocity, and responsibility are the areas that need to be addressed by higher learning institutes to make space for Indigenous students. In viewing Indigenous students in terms other than high attrition and low graduation rates, the authors argue for “a higher educational system that respects them for who they are [as Indigenous students], that is relevant to their view of the world, that offers reciprocity in their relationships with others, and that helps them exercise responsibility over their own lives” (Kirkness and Barnhardt, 2001, p. 1). Set beside Gilligan’s work, we start to see overlap, even the emerging of an ethical relational space, namely in the recognition of respect and interconnectedness, or a sense of reciprocity, in our relations with one another.

Moreover, an ethics of care implies a commitment to one another, one that moves a person beyond awareness, recognition, and empathy to that of making a real difference through targeted action. Reflecting this spirit of praxis, Hollenbeck, Williams, and Klein (1989) report that a sense of commitment to difficult goals, in our case reconciliation, is more likely when the commitment is made publicly, rather than privately, and when there is an internal locus of control driving the decision to act. This shift from a knowingness that is expressed as caring and onto commitment is

crucial in terms of developing a relational approach through meaningful connections. The Canadian Council on Learning (2007) had this to say about the need to honour our interconnectedness as a principle of lifelong learning within a holistic approach to learning from a First Nations worldview,

The First Nations Holistic Lifelong Learning Model is premised on the understanding that the First Nation learner dwells in a world of continual reformation, where interactive cycles, rather than disconnected events, occur. In this world, nothing is simply a cause or an effect, but is instead the expression of the interconnectedness of life. These relationships are circular, rather than linear, holistic and cumulative, instead of compartmentalized. The mode of learning for First Nations people reflects and honours this awareness. (p. 19)

And, from a Métis perspective, we see similar value systems identified to First Nations, including interconnectedness, reciprocity, and a collective sense of working towards the greater good:

All life – and all learning – is interconnected through relationships that involve contributing to and benefitting from the well-being of each living entity. The individual learner is part of a wider community of learners within the Natural Order. (Canadian Council on Learning, 2007, p. 22)

Within a university setting, these natural human connections have been devalued and, in some cases, severed by the privileging of hierarchies, individualism, and uber-competitiveness. Our ensemble mentorship model seeks to open relational spaces where collaborative efforts hold the potential to transform how we relate to one another in spaces of teaching and learning.

Yvonne: *Respecting the Indigenous principle of “nothing about us, without us” – essential as the practice is – means a heavy burden is often carried by a few. Given the lack of Indigenous instructors to meet growing needs, I think it is important to remember there are many other ‘teachers’ out there. I am thinking of land-based and experiential learning opportunities such as service-learning or community-based capstone projects where students experience first-hand the impact of colonialism on Indigenous peoples (Poitras Pratt and Danyluk, 2018) and can reflect on the implications of their own positioning within the web of relations (Graveline, 1998). These lessons, executed properly, are inherently collaborative and decolonising. And, since the community becomes involved, the mentorship ensemble broadens even further (Burke and MacDonald, 2020).*

Michelle: *In tending first and foremost to the nurturing of the relationships that I have within my community – students, colleagues, Elders, community members, family members etc. – I am purposefully making attempts to destabilise hierarchies of perceived power. When I encounter all ‘other’ person(s) with humility and humanity, I am centering connection. In opening up epistemic spaces with the aim of providing a decolonising praxis, a compassionate curation of content and context are paramount in creating an inclusive journey towards reconciliation. There is space for everyone at this decolonising fire.*

Sulyn: *The current, neoliberal way of doing things in education is not working. Even before the pandemic, my middle school students (aged 13-15) were riddled with self-doubt and anxieties surrounding their academic achievement; their teachers anguish under workloads expected of one, but meant for many; K-12 administrators revolve through silver-bullet strategic plans; and our university teaching, learning, and structures expect increasingly unachievable singular achievements. My questions to non-Indigenous readers: How can we summon the humility to acknowledge the brilliant and established relational educational approaches before us? For how long will we allow racism to blind and cowardice to paralyse us?*

As a global family, many of us are waking up to a growing need to do better; in this pivotal moment, we can slip right back to a damaging status quo that privileges economic and political gain, or we can remind ourselves of our common humanity by honouring values that nurture a sense of interconnectedness. In this moment of shared dis-ease, we propose that relationships in higher learning institutes can be reimagined as dynamic, organic, and flexible in small but significant ways. What is required is those of us in teaching and learning roles show up ready to be humble, courageous, vulnerable, and open to sharing power.

Figure 3: Kevin Peeace (2020) Untitled



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