



ABOUT “WHAT I LEARNED IN CLASS TODAY”: ABORIGINAL ISSUES IN THE CLASSROOM

PROJECT BACKGROUND

We, Karrmen Crey and Amy Perreault, are graduates of the First Nations Studies Program (FNSP) at the University of British Columbia. FNSP is an interdisciplinary program, which means that in addition to FNSP’s core courses, students take courses from many different departments and programs within the Faculty of Arts and across the university. One day in a senior FNSP class, a group of us sat around and compared ignorant and racist comments that had been made by students about Aboriginal content in our other classes. For most of us who were there, these situations were familiar, even typical, and by telling each other about them, we were doing something we’d done many times before: trade stories and then laugh at how ridiculous they were as a way for us to deal with the pain that they caused.

In this particular class meeting, someone suggested that we should record our stories, pointing out that our experiences were identifying serious issues around the level of discussion of Aboriginal content in classrooms at UBC. While we may have been laughing about ignorant and racist comments when we told them to each other, at the time we experienced them, these comments were alienating, and in some cases, traumatic enough to prevent us from being able to attend class or do our coursework. We discussed creating a public record of these experiences in the form of videotaped interviews would make these situations visible, and help identify the dynamics underpinning them. These records could also form the basis of discussions about how to best address these situations across postsecondary institutional levels.

The class where this discussion took place was for FNSP 400 - Practicum, a senior class that partners students with local Aboriginal organizations to design and conduct research projects that address a research need identified by these organizations. Interestingly, in this particular year, all of our projects were related by the ways in which they considered how media could be used to advance Aboriginal research interests; it was in this context that the foundations of this project were set in place. Within a few months, we decided to pursue this project, designed to be a major research project that took place as an undergraduate directed studies course in the First Nations Studies Program at UBC (<http://fnsp.arts.ubc.ca>). In the timeline of a 13 week, 3-credit course, we interviewed nine Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal undergraduate students at UBC, and recorded their interviews using digital

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video. We asked them to share their most memorable classroom experiences where the discussions of Aboriginal subject matter became problematic. We also asked them to reflect on the factors that they thought made these conversations difficult. The resulting videotaped interviews form the basis of this project and accompanying support materials.

SITUATING THE PROJECT

Existing Research on Students' Classroom Experiences and Aboriginal Issues at the Postsecondary Level

We invited Aboriginal students and non-Aboriginal students who had taken courses with significant Aboriginal content at UBC to participate in interviews. We recognize that non-Aboriginal students are troubled and offended by racist and ignorant statements, and that their experiences and insights of difficult classroom discussions can provide us with more information about the dynamics that are involved in these situations. The participation of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students in this project and the concerns that they expressed indicates that intervening in problematic discussions can assist to improve the experiences of a broad student base.

In order to frame our research, we conducted a review of available literature to first see if the classroom environment had been discussed in relation to Aboriginal issues in postsecondary institutions. More broadly, we wanted to get a sense of the discourse around Aboriginal issues and considerations at the postsecondary level.

We found several streams of thought that seemed most dominant in this literature. One stream might be described as "Indian control of Indian education," from the Native Indian Brotherhood's statement of the same name, *Indian Control of Indian Education* (1972). This document discusses the history of assimilationist colonial policies and practices, as embodied by residential schools, to call for Aboriginal jurisdiction over Aboriginal peoples' education. The principles and measures it outlines include the creation of Indian Teacher Education Programs (TEPs) in order to redress a lack of Aboriginal teachers certified to teach in Aboriginal communities, who, it was argued, would also be able to do so respecting Aboriginal community values. ICIE also proposes measures such as supplementary services, recruitment strategies, and counseling support for Aboriginal students to alleviate disadvantages experienced by Aboriginal students entering any postsecondary institutions. The Minister of the Department of Indian and Northern Development (DIAND) accepted *Indian Control of Indian Education* and committed the Department to implementing its proposal.

Based on our experiences as undergraduate students, we found these principles very much in practice at UBC. UBC is home to the Native Indian Teacher Education Program (NITEP), and has several other Aboriginal academic programs currently active (including the First Nations Studies Program, Aboriginal Science, the Division of Aboriginal People's Health, the First Nations Languages Program, etc). Aboriginal Student Affairs in the Faculty of Arts provides Aboriginal students with academic advising, while the First Nations House of Learning offers a number of student services

administered by Aboriginal staff and faculty, such as counseling, student programs, and awards. These services and programs provide valuable support designed to consider the specificity of Aboriginal students' experiences and needs within postsecondary institutional contexts.

While Aboriginal student services play a significant role in assisting Aboriginal students succeed in postsecondary institutions, these services do not necessarily address the university's infrastructural shortfalls with respect to Aboriginal peoples and history in units and departments across the university. Creating specialized services and programs creates an institutional dynamic where the "business as usual" of the university can proceed while Aboriginal student concerns and considerations are relegated to specialized areas. Services and programs do not constitute an adequate intervention at all levels of Aboriginal student participation at the university; they are not designed to intervene in the classroom, where Aboriginal students - as university students - participate most crucially.

Addressing Aboriginal student needs as specialized services implies that Aboriginal students are at a deficit in postsecondary institutions, and require supplementary support in order to succeed. However, our research suggests that while Aboriginal students may have challenges with regards to postsecondary institutions due to historical, social, and cultural factors, the university itself is at a significant deficit when it comes to addressing Aboriginal issues. Faculty members are hired for their expertise in their fields, not because of their teaching skills. In addition, training in teaching culturally and politically sensitive material is not required for instructors. This project was conceptualized in order to show how these factors and other dynamics underpin problematic discussions of Aboriginal content in classrooms, and to make visible their consequences for students - both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal. It is intended to provide the University of British Columbia and other postsecondary institutions with material that can be used to develop ways of improving the classroom environment and, by extension, students' postsecondary experiences.

THE PROJECT DESIGN AND RESEARCH PROCESS

The following is an outline of our research process for the first phase of the project, which was designed as an undergraduate, directed studies course in the First Nations Studies Program at the University of British Columbia. Those who are interested in knowing more about the project's initial design and development can find information here. In addition, for those wishing to undertake their own investigations, this process may offer a potential research model. This outline can be used and adapted to structure your own projects as best suits your research parameters, your institutions' research protocols, and its ethics procedures. If you would like more information about this phase of the process, or if you have questions about our subsequent research phases, please contact us.

The first phase of the research process took place within the timeframe of a postsecondary level 3-credit course (13 weeks) starting in January and continuing to the end of early April 2007. For this phase, we intended to interview Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal students, both current and alumni, who had attended courses with significant Aboriginal content at UBC, Point Grey campus. We chose video as the primary medium for this project because of its powerful ability to communicate the impact of students' experiences, more so than may be possible in print or other media. In addition, we wanted to provide participants with a medium that would allow them to represent themselves with as much authority over their accounts and reflections as possible.

In this first phase of the project, our deliverables consisted of:

1. A project proposal detailing our project design, deliverables, and timeline;
2. An edited DVD of interviews;
3. A video archive of the full-length interviews;
4. An annotated bibliography of sources relevant to our investigation;
5. A final critical paper analyzing of our research findings and methodology, and integrating analysis of the sources identified for the annotated bibliography.

The completion of deliverables in this stage of the project was greatly assisted by our previous year's experience of completing a major research project as a part of the First Nations Studies major program. FNSP 400 - Practicum is a 6-credit course conducted from September to March every year in the First Nations Studies Program. The Practicum partners senior FNSP students with local Aboriginal organizations to develop and conduct a major research project with that organization. Student projects are diverse depending on the project design that they have negotiated with their partner organization, but involve a similar research process and timeline, and

frequently similar deliverables (i.e. an archive of interviews, research reports, etc). The Practicum gave us the experience and a curricular framework to develop and successfully complete the first stage of this project in the time frame of a 3-credit course. For more information about the FNSP Practicum, please click [here](#).

TIMELINE

This timeline reflects our research process, which closely follows that for the FNSP 400 - Practicum, albeit in a compressed timeframe (from 8 months for our Practicum projects to roughly 3 months for our project design). This timeline identifies deliverables that were possible to produce within the timeframe of a 13-week, 3 credit course; after the end of the course, project materials continued to be under development and new materials added to the project.

December:	Complete and submit application for human subjects research to the Behavioural Research Ethics Board (BREB) (**please see below).
Mid-January:	Begin research for annotated bibliography.
Mid-February:	Upon Ethics Board approval, begin recruitment by circulating posters advertising an information session about the project and its goals. Book a space for the information session and produce materials for attendees. Conduct information session and collect contact information of interested participants. Begin to set up and conduct individual interviews with interested participants.
Mid-February to mid-March:	Organize and conduct focus groups, if interest and participation warrants. Continue to conduct individual interviews.
Mid- to end of March:	Complete collecting interviews and focus groups. Begin editing of individual interviews and focus groups for archive and edited video.
End of March/ Early April:	Produce edit of video to screen for participants' review. Complete and submit analytical report of research findings and research methodology, and annotated bibliography.

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****We began the process of writing and submitting Human Subjects paperwork almost two months prior to the start date of our project in order to provide enough time to get approval to begin the research process. Ethics approval is an important step in the research process, and can be time consuming. Our paperwork sent back to us twice with provisos, and it took two months before we received approval to proceed with interviewing participants. Ethics approval can take a considerable amount of time, particularly when interviewing participants on videotape, and this should be considered well in advance of any planned start-date for this kind of research project.**

ABOUT THE USERS GUIDE

We edited together excerpts from the nine videotaped student interviews to create a video that has been screened at numerous venues at the University of British Columbia and in Vancouver. Feedback from students, instructors, administrators, and others indicated that a resource package would increase the usability and accessibility of this project. While we had always intended for the project to be made publicly available, we understand that support materials would help make this project truly be accessible by providing a way of using the video materials with the sensitivity required of the subject matter. To respond to this need, we have developed this Users' Guide that includes the videotaped interviews in their entirety using the Interactive Video/Transcript Viewer (IVT).

The resources included in this package have been developed to assist instructors (including teaching assistants and others) and those who train instructors to identify and strategize ways of addressing problematic classroom situations. Instructors are authorities in the classroom, and as such, they model ways of engaging with classroom discussion that have far reaching effects when we consider how many students encounter and then base their own behaviors on those learned in the classroom. We do not underestimate the significance of the role of the instructors in the classroom, but we do recognize that frequently academic institutions do not provide adequate teacher training and support for instructors to engage with these issues.

This is not to say that facilitators are the only ones who may find this project useful or of interest. Students, administrators, and others who encounter discussions of Aboriginal issues and other cultural sensitivity issues – whether personally or professionally – may find these resources helpful in thinking about and addressing these situations. In addition, the IVT archive of edited videos makes these videos searchable and academically citable for students and researchers to enable the use of these materials for research purposes in ways that we will hope will broaden the usability of this project.

CONTENTS OF THE USERS GUIDE

USERS GUIDE COMPONENTS

- An edited video compilation of students' interviews entitled *What I Learned in Class Today: Aboriginal Issues in the Classroom* on the accompanying DVD-ROM;
- An archive of the full individual interviews using the Interactive Video/Transcript Viewer (IVT) on the accompanying DVD-ROM (with full transcripts in PDF form in the "Printable Session Transcripts" folder);
- Discussion Modules to help facilitators and others to design workshops, meetings, screenings, and other venues.

What I Learned in Class Today: Aboriginal Issues in the Classroom (21 mins)

This video is a compilation of several student interviews, and has a three part structure: 1) students recounting their most "memorable" classroom experiences; 2) students discussing how these incidents affected them, including their ability to do their coursework and function in class; and 3) students reflecting on the dynamics that go into making these situations occur. The video is intended to be used in workshops, meetings, classes, and other venues to make visible issues in the discussion of Aboriginal content in classrooms.

The IVT Archive

All 9 student interviews are archived and available using the Interactive Video/Transcript Viewer (IVT). The IVT is an innovative tool developed in the First Nations Studies Program at the University of British Columbia. The IVT makes it possible to play a video and its transcript simultaneously. The transcript will update with the video as you watch it. This tool also makes video searchable: when you search the transcript for key words or phrases, the video will update to the segment of video containing that word or phrase.

A more detailed outline of the features of the IVT and how to use it for meetings and workshops is included with this Users Guide in Section 3, Workshop Resources, "Appendix B – Using the IVT."

In the IVT folder (located on the accompanying DVD-ROM) is a folder titled "Printable Session Transcripts" that contains all interview transcripts in PDF form. These have been included for those who would like to read the transcripts without the video portion of the interview.

Discussion Modules

Modules are based on issues and experiences from students' interviews, and incorporate discussion questions, exercises, and opportunities for further thought. The rationale for the design of these Modules is that discussion is the best outcome to conflictual issues and situations; silence perpetuates the lack of understanding around Aboriginal history and issues and impedes students', instructors', and others' abilities to move forward in their learning and understanding. These Modules can be used as the basis for workshops, meetings, and classes where discussions of cultural sensitivity issues take place, and can be adapted in whatever way works best for the focus and intention of particular meetings.

We have also included a model of a workshop based on these Modules that we have held in the past as a template for those wishing to hold their own workshops. The Workshop Model is located in Section 3 of this Users Guide.

“WHAT I LEARNED IN CLASS TODAY” ONLINE

You will find these resource materials online at the “What I Learned in Class Today” website at <http://www.whatilearnedinclasstoday.com>. This website provides up-to-date information about the project, and as new resource materials are developed, they will be made available here. As the website develops, it will include features such as feedback and discussion forums, and information about upcoming screenings, meetings, and other project news, so be sure to check back for updates.

WHAT THIS PROJECT IS, AND WHAT IT ISN'T

“What I Learned in Class Today”: *Aboriginal Issues in the Classroom* and accompanying resource materials are not designed to prescribe solutions to the issues that are raised by students’ observations and insights. We hope that these materials provide some starting points to and support for thinking through classroom climate issues and how to address issues in the classroom, but we think that it would be misleading to presume that there is a particular response that will work for a specific classroom situation. As students’ interviews indicate, classroom situations and the dynamics informing them are always complex and variable, and can’t be addressed with formulaic responses.

Nor is the project intended to represent the University of British Columbia’s response to difficult classroom discussions of Aboriginal issues – rather, it invites the University of British Columbia to respond to the issues that the project identifies by finding ways of addressing them at the university level. In keeping with this goal, the edited video has been screened at several venues at UBC to generate discussions about what those units could do within their influence and resources to improve the classroom environment and expand instructors’ capacities to teach and discuss Aboriginal content in their classes. The best outcome for this project is a willingness to engage in sustained and substantial discussions about how to address these issues, between instructors and other facilitators, within individual academic and administrative units, and across the university.



ABOUT US

Amy Perreault

I come from Metis heritage out of Thompson, Manitoba, though I grew up in West Kootenays. I started to be interested in how Aboriginal issues are discussed at the post-secondary level when I started sharing my classroom experiences with fellow Aboriginal students. The discussions I had were a very useful way for me to process my own experiences with these issues; as well, they identified a need for there to be a better way for instructors and students to engage with Aboriginal issues in a way that would produce more productive and professional discussions in the classroom.

During my undergraduate degree I had the opportunity to work as a peer advisor and program assistant in First Nations Student Services, now Aboriginal Student Affairs. This experience gave me a better understanding of how the university engages with Aboriginal students and the services that are provided to help recruit and retain these students. I think that it was this experience that led me to think of the classroom as one of the spaces that potentially affects students and their ability to function at the university. I hope this project will be the beginning of discussions about how to improve students' post-secondary experiences.

Karmen Crey

I come from Sto:lo heritage from the Pilalt territory. I approached this project as a student of Aboriginal heritage, having had many conversations with my peers about alienating classroom experiences and how to address them; in fact, this project developed out of one of these conversations. Our discussions also showed us how powerful students' experiences were when told in their own voices, and in order to most effectively communicate the impact of their stories, we designed the project to interview participants using digital video.

My background is in film and video studies and First Nations studies, and over the past several years I've become interested in the potential of media and new technologies for moving forward the discussion of Aboriginal issues. We developed the project with this in mind, using new technologies and web-based tools to develop key components of the project with the goal of engaging a broad public in a dialogue on having more effective classroom discussions of Aboriginal issues. I hope that you will find these materials useful, and look forward to your thoughts and feedback.

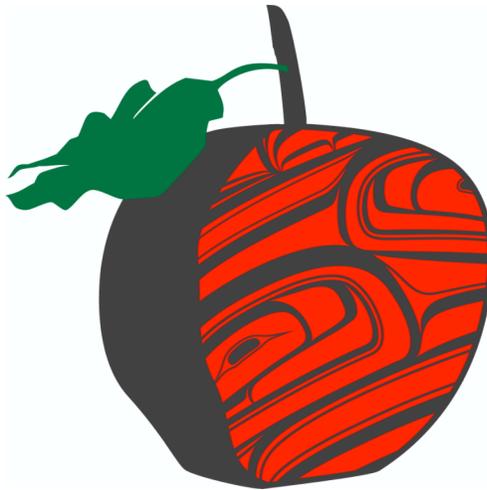
ABOUT THE LOGO

We'd like to thank Alano Edzerza for adapting the idea of the "apple" in the design of the logo for this project. The logo for this project is © Alano Edzerza, 2008.

If you are interested in Alano Edzerza's work, please visit:

<http://www.edzerzagallery.com/>

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*What I Learned in Class Today:
Aboriginal Issues in the Classroom*
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