

MODULE 4

IMPROVING THE CLASSROOM SITUATION: THINKING THROUGH POTENTIAL STRATEGIES



What do you think would improve the classroom discussions of Aboriginal content?

"...It should be mandatory regardless of your area of study, regardless of your faculty, there should be an Aboriginal component. And it should be instructed by an Aboriginal person. I don't know if it's history or language or if it would be something regional, specific to your area. People will go through this entire university experience: undergraduate, postgraduate, doctoral, masters...they'll go through that entire thing and not know a thing about Native people." (IVT: 3,46)

"[There] needs to be something done earlier on in the institutional experience, in a 100-level class or something, that provides people with a general knowledge so that it allows deeper conversation...people become more aware even if it's just a little bit, but it opens up some of their some of those doors so that everything they hear or read in the media they don't take for truth; they can offer critical analysis of that even if its just a little trickle of knowledge." (IVT: 4,44-45)

"I think first year undergraduates should take some kind of basic course that has the basics of First Nations BC history...And get an understanding of and grasp of that before they go into these different areas that might have First Nations content in them. So that they can learn about colonization and what has happened, there's lots to absorb, there's lots to learn, but I think an introductory course would really help." (IVT: 8,35)

Before proceeding with this Module, please watch IVT: 3,46, 4,44-45, and 8,35.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

In meetings, workshops, and interviews, participants frequently indicate that a mandatory foundations course would assist to improve the classroom discussion of Aboriginal issues. These individuals have discussed how a foundations course consisting of key terms, concepts and issues related to Aboriginal histories and issues would assist to broaden students' general knowledge of these issues and ability to engage in discussions of Aboriginal content in classes. Certainly in our own experience, when students lack a basic knowledge of key concepts, particularly in classes with an Aboriginal focus, it often takes considerable class time, sometimes weeks, to catch them up. As students, we would sometimes wait two or three weeks for the students to gain an understanding of what residential schools were or what the Indian Act is before being able to move ahead with the scheduled course curriculum. Students who are familiar with these issues often report being frustrated by this process because it keeps the conversation at a basic level and impedes their abilities to engage in more in-depth conversations.

In relation to sensitivity issues, the lack of knowledge of Aboriginal issues can often result in naïve or ill-informed questions and assumptions from students. A mandatory foundations course in Aboriginal issues and history is an opportunity for students to increase their familiarity with these issues, potentially reducing the frequency of certain problematic questions or comments. However, providing more information through the implementation of a foundations course does not necessarily destabilize the "information" about Aboriginal people and issues that generate difficult and traumatic situations - the assumptions about Aboriginal people that underpin insensitive comments and generate problematic situations.

The implementation of mandatory curriculum involves social and infrastructural issues that need consideration before pursuing this project. If students were required to take such a course, they wouldn't necessarily be willingly engaging with the material, which could do more harm than good. They are not invested in these courses the same way as they are with courses in their programs or that are of interest to them; students frequently leave their required courses until the their final year of their programs to be completed "off the corner of their desks," so to speak. A mandatory course in Aboriginal issues may very likely be treated in the same way. The level of respect and sensitivity towards the material under these circumstances could be minimal; in fact, they may exacerbate classroom sensitivity issues.

A related approach institutions might consider would be to identify existing Aboriginal-focused courses as satisfying a requirement for Aboriginal content as a part of students' degree programs. However, if existing courses are treated as mandatory, their enrollment would be flooded, overwhelming the infrastructure and straining their existing resources - human and

otherwise. Institutions may consider implementing mandatory curriculum as a strategy, but only after they have built the infrastructure to sustain it, and a dialogue on the necessary timing should be undertaken with students who justifiably advocate for this solution.

However, implementing mandatory curriculum would not increase an instructor's ability to deal with classroom incidents or issues around discussions of Aboriginal content; in fact, under these circumstances, the burden on instructors would be exponential. The key point is that the implementation of mandatory curriculum should follow the human resources - not the other way around. There is no point in creating mandatory foundations courses to be taught by instructors who don't have the necessary capacity. These courses would require instructors who are highly skilled in teaching sensitive subject matter and who have the patience and dedication to handle a significant course enrolment - a considerable challenge. They consume an instructor's time and energy, and are frequently thankless. Faculty who have this skill set get worn out after only a few years because of the demands of such courses. For this kind of implementation to work, there needs to be enough instructors with the requisite skills to cycle through the course.

Aboriginal instructors are frequently identified as being the ideal candidates for teaching this kind of course. The experiences and perspectives that Aboriginal faculty bring to the classroom discussion can add to students' understandings of the issues whether the faculty member's course is specifically focused on Aboriginal issues or not. By virtue of their social position, these instructors can bring a social reality and potentially a sensitivity that can result in more nuanced and in-depth conversations. This is a compelling reason for the university to keep hiring top quality Aboriginal instructors to continue building capacity as it's able to. Of course, having the social position* doesn't mean that you have the skills to engage these issues successfully. While Aboriginal faculty would bring social location to that investigation, there are certainly non-Aboriginal faculty who could do an excellent job. This is an issue that is critical and deserves further, very detailed investigation.

Initiatives that are underway to address cultural sensitivity issues in the university are hiring Aboriginal faculty and adding course offerings with Aboriginal designations to increase awareness of Aboriginal history and issues in the institution. We're adding to these initiatives by identifying and assisting the university to improve instructor capacity to teach and engage in discussions in this material by building a resource for instructors build their own best practices in these discussions.

WORKSHOP MATERIALS

WORKSHOP PLAYLIST

1. IVT: 3,46
2. IVT: 4,44 – 4,45
3. IVT: 8,35

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Watch IVT: 3,46, 4,44 – 4,45, 8,35.
 - a. What are students identifying as a way of improving the classroom discussion of Aboriginal issues?
2. What can be accomplished by a required foundations level course in Aboriginal history and issues? How might it increase sensitivity around Aboriginal issues?
3. What are some of the limitations/problems of a mandatory foundations course?

QUESTIONS FOR FURTHER DISCUSSION

1. What resources are required to put in place a mandatory course? Human and otherwise?
2. Think about existing courses that are mandatory for students, for instance, literature courses, science courses, language courses, etc. To your knowledge, how do students engage these courses? When we extend this to considering a foundations level course on Aboriginal issues, how can we anticipate students will engage with this kind of course?
3. By comparison, other alternatives may seem modest, but they may be more attainable and effective. What other alternatives are achievable in the short and longer run at your institution? What would be the most effective alternatives at your institutions?