

# *What I Learned in Class Today: Educational Experiences and Institutional Responses to Indigenous Engagement in Curriculum, Pedagogy, and Classroom Climate at UBC*

## Summary of Themes Report

### Overview

Throughout Fall 2018, Indigenous Initiatives at the Centre for Teaching, Learning and Technology conducted focus groups on the support of Indigenous engagement and students on campus and in the classroom. There was a total of five focus groups divided into four categories—undergraduate students; grad students and TA's; faculty, staff and administrators; alumnus and past participants from the original What I Learned in Class Today project. The focus groups were designed to help explore how the areas within Indigenous engagement; educational experiences and institutional responses to Indigenous engagement in curriculum, pedagogy and classroom climate have shifted specific to UBC Point Grey Campus since 2007.

The project team recruited a total of 12 participants—4 grad students and TAs; 5 faculty, staff and administrators; 3 from alumnus and past participants. We were unable to successfully recruit undergraduate students for focus groups, however were able to recruit and conduct 1-1 interviews throughout the spring term 2019.

Participants were asked to speak to their experiences when it came to learning about Indigenous topics, histories, and knowledges in teaching and learning; how Indigenous topics were framed in curriculum, classroom, and workplace; and participants experiences with colleagues, peers, and classmates when it came to learning about Indigenous topics. This report presents overlapping themes and recommendations by focus group participants. For further questions regarding findings and/or this report, please contact Erin Yun at [erin.yun@ubc.ca](mailto:erin.yun@ubc.ca)

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## Group 1 - Graduate Students and Teaching Assistants

### Theme 1: Experiences learning about Indigenous topics and support for teaching and learning in this area.

#### *Systemic and structural challenges within education and curriculum*

Graduate students and TA's who participated in the focus groups identified ongoing structural challenges, such as time constraints, within Masters and PhD programs as a key barrier for research that is supportive of community values and building relationships. The confined structure of these degree programs prioritize research over building meaningful relationships with communities, which make it difficult to engage in research that integrates Indigenous knowledges and perspectives. Students also identified that ethics board requirements can create challenges when wanting to focus research that is community-driven because of the way academic institutions have defined the process of research and ethics.

Some students expressed that there is still a lack of Indigenous faculty at UBC, which shows that the education system is not built for Indigenous people. Students shared that the lack of Indigenous faculty remains a challenge because some disciplines are beginning to integrate Indigenous Studies streams without any infrastructures or support set in place for Indigenous faculty.

#### *Limited time, funding, and resources*

Students felt that supervisors were cognizant of their limited time as a TA and as a result the direction they were given as a TA was to not spend much time providing feedback on assignments and rather to stay within the recommended hours of their positions. Students expressed that this limitation of time posed a challenge in their ability to further their learning about Indigenous topics, histories, and realities because this learning takes time and often goes beyond the limitations of the role of a TA. An example of this is when a student is TA-ing a course, they often have very little time to cover course material and at times this does not leave enough time to build a supportive classroom climate where Indigenous topics will be discussed. The limitations of prep time to build a good environment for these discussions as well as the time to build ones own capacity in this area was a major theme expressed by TA's.

Students also mentioned that the TA training workshops that they had access to in their programs and departments are very broad and do not provide specific training in navigating difficult conversations in the classroom. Students felt that providing formal training in this area would be beneficial in their role as a TA and would better equip them in having difficult and contentious conversations in the classroom.

## **Theme 2: How have Indigenous topics been framed in classes and curriculum**

### *Knowledge gaps across disciplines and within the classroom*

Students shared that some of their peers in the classroom still did not know about residential schools and the discourse on Indigenous histories and knowledges differ from each discipline. Students identified that each discipline carries different contexts, and the discussions on Indigenous topics differ as a result. In some instances students have found it difficult to bring up issues of colonization and whiteness without provoking defensive reactions from their peers and in some cases their instructors. Integrating these complex discussions into the field of Science or quantitative disciplines is a challenge because of the varying paradigms at play.

### *Intercultural contexts and global Indigenous topics*

Some students shared that intercultural contexts have created contentious environments in the classroom when Indigenous topics are raised. UBC has a significant number of international students and when raising Indigenous topics, people have to be prepared to talk about global Indigenous topics as well. Participants mentioned that international Indigenous relations are different than the Canadian context and if students are bringing this up in the classroom, instructors need to be able to navigate this conversation as a teachable moment. Along the same terrain, students also mentioned that on the structural level, there are not enough spaces or opportunities to learn about Indigenous topics and how to navigate these conversations well.

## **Theme 3: Engagements with peers and colleagues on Indigenous topics, histories, and realities**

### *Discomfort, fear, and reluctance*

Students articulated that some of their experiences that they are speaking to are outside of the classroom (i.e. extra-curricular activities, casual conversations with friends, etc.). Some of these conversations have been uncomfortable and at times there has been a noticeable reluctance in asking critical questions and being sensitive to issues of whiteness. Students shared that they grapple with saying the wrong thing when having difficult discussions and are afraid that by doing so they might be shutting down the conversation.

Questions that participants of this focus group continue to reflect on are: “*What does it mean to be an ally?*,” and, “*how to be in good relation with Indigenous communities?*” The focus group participants also shared that they wanted to role model the discomfort of learning about Canada’s history and ways to unlearn what they’ve been taught within the education system through the process of asking more critical and deeper questions.

Students shared that the Indigenous Community Planning concentration offered through the School of Community and Regional Planning (SCARP), in partnership with Musqueam, has been one of the best learning experiences. In these courses, facilitators and teachers modelled respectful engagement, trust, and reciprocity that helped students learn that this can happen beyond the classroom and academia.

## Theme 4: Challenges

### *Creating a productive and supportive classroom climate for all learners*

Students mentioned that a main challenge in both their role as a graduate student and TA was learning to navigate varying levels of prior knowledge of students who are coming into the class and learning to make space for all learners. Students shared that they wanted a learning environment where people are able to ask questions without feeling afraid in asking the wrong question, while having an instructor that acknowledges the importance of learning about these topics as well as navigating these discussions in a critical, thoughtful, and attentive way.

### *Cultural responsibility and accountability*

Students strongly expressed that it is everyone's responsibility in learning about these topics, specifically because of the TRC's 94 calls to action and the new Indigenous Strategic Plan. In further reflection the students expressed that in classrooms at UBC we are now seeing that students are more knowledgeable and have more experience in learning about Indigenous histories and contemporary realities, which calls for instructors to learn more about these areas which can help with better supporting students in their learning.

### *Indigeneity within intercultural and global contexts in teaching and learning*

Participants shared that they are still challenged with the intercultural contexts of students coming from different global Indigenous relations (see theme 2). In addition, they mentioned that not only are students coming from different intercultural and global contexts, they are also coming from across disciplines where Indigenous topics are discussed differently. One student shared an example that in hard sciences and quantitative fields, land acknowledgements are not always practiced, *"in my field of Science, land acknowledgements don't even exist... just to lower the bar."*

## Theme 5: Shifts in the teaching and learning environment since 2007

The majority of students in this focus group shared that they had not been around UBC long enough to answer this question. A couple of students however mentioned that they have noticed a more nuanced engagement and since the TRC West Coast event there has been more momentum with Indigenous engagement in teaching and learning.

## Theme 6: Areas of future support

For future support, the participants shared that they would like more opportunities to have discussions around white fragility in spaces at UBC; opportunities to address the fear and reluctance in learning about Indigenous histories and topics; more spaces for interdisciplinary dialogue; mandatory training requirements that are stated in TA contracts; and building Indigenous competencies into graduate programs.

## Group 2 - Faculty, Staff, and Administrators

### Theme 1: Experiences in learning about Indigenous topics and support for teaching and learning in this area.

#### *Everyone is accountable to learning*

Faculty and staff identified the instructor as having a pivotal role in making connections for students learning about Indigenous topics. They reflected that if the instructor is willing to learn about Indigenous topics, embed this learning into their practice and make meaningful connections to it in their classroom, students in return will also be willing to make those connections as part of their learning. Faculty and staff also discussed the importance of carrying this momentum into all spaces of the university. They identified this ripple effect of impact and engagement with Indigenous initiatives in teaching and learning and professional practices also has the potential to extend to colleagues who support faculty and the work of the institution. Participants shared that if people are willing to take the risk and have the courage to learn about these topics and it is built into the culture of UBC, some of the burden in learning about Indigenous topics will be dispersed onto non-Indigenous colleagues.

Participants shared that there are several initiatives on campus they are aware of that build capacity and knowledge about Indigenous initiatives, histories and experiences. One example is the UBC Cultural Safety 23/24 program where Indigenous facilitators from Indigenous organizations are able to work with people who are at varying levels of knowledges and experiences in this subject matter. Some health science programs have integrated this program as a foundational introductory learning experience course.

#### *Lack of institutional leadership, support and accountability*

Participants expressed that there is little to no institutional leadership or support and accountability in the areas where they are employed. They further reflected that some of our roles are to hold the institution accountable. Participants shared that in their experience Indigenous engagement and learning about areas connected to Indigenous histories and perspectives are solely up to the individual where there is no sense of direction from leadership in how to seek out information and learning. Participants shared that this is represented throughout the student body, where the student is much more advanced in having the skills and knowledge with Indigenous topics and histories than the instructor. One participant stated, *“Still, the vast majority is that there is no responsibility on the individual to seek out information and learn. There is no sense broadly across senior leadership, it’s up to us as individuals and institutions to inform and education ourselves. We also still see that students are away more advanced than faculty and staff in this area.”*

#### *Knowledge gaps across disciplines and global contexts*

As mentioned in theme 1, participants identified that they had varying levels of experiences and knowledges with Indigenous topics and have noticed that students are becoming much more

advanced than where instructors are. Although there are small pockets of instructors that are continuing to learn about Indigenous topics and integrate Indigenous content in their courses, there are still varying levels of prior knowledge that students are coming into the classroom with. In addition, participants shared that international students who are new to Canada have found learning about Indigenous topics challenging as they are coming from their own cultural contexts.

## **Theme 2: How have Indigenous topics been framed in curriculum or workplace**

### *Same people taking on the burden*

Participants expressed, in their contexts, that the same people are taking on most of the burden and emotional labour when integrating Indigenous topics into their own workplace or environment. This theme has been reoccurring throughout all the focus groups. Participants recommended that to help alleviate some of this burden and work there is a need for more non-Indigenous allies. It was also suggested that the important part in this work is to acknowledge and understand who we are. In other words, people understanding their own positionalities, how settlers got here, and where settlers are currently situated, specifically working on the unceded lands where the university sits on.

Some participants shared that it is not only about how Indigenous topics are framed, but rather bringing these conversations to the senior level and have the decision-makers understand the importance of engaging with Indigenous topics and realities. Participants suggested that there is a significant need for more support from upper administrators and leadership so that the same people do not become burnt out in doing this work.

### *Moving away from checkboxes and into the discomfort of unlearning*

Since the Truth and Reconciliation Commission released their 94 calls to action, post-secondary institutions have started to pay more attention in responding to these calls to action. Participants shared that their experiences on campus, post-TRC calls to action, have become more like checkboxes rather than taking the time to make meaningful connections to their own contexts and learning. Participants shared that having conversations on positionalities and identity are important when making meaningful connections to strategic initiatives and policies. One participant suggested that in order for people to move beyond superficial checkboxes is for them to make a commitment to learning how to make meaningful and thoughtful land acknowledgements that connect to identities, including how as settlers they got here.

## **Theme 3: Engagements with colleagues and students on Indigenous topics, histories, and realities**

### *Shifting practice to reciprocity*

Participants shared that in their own practice they try to practice reciprocity through acknowledging who they are, while being clear in what brings them to their work, training, and scholarly work. Practicing and normalizing the discomfort of learning as an ongoing process and

putting vulnerability forward with relationships, students and peers are ways to practice reciprocity. Participants shared that the first step in engaging with this work is to show up and be present.

### *Centering student voices*

Some participants mentioned that in their engagement with students on Indigenous topics, histories and realities, one of their practices is to center student voices through listening and receiving feedback from programs. Participants shared that their students wellbeing is their biggest priority and that this includes creating resources to support students and their voices.

## **Theme 4: Challenges**

### *Not walking the talk*

Participants shared that one of the main areas where they feel stuck is when the institution and units within the institution are not walking the talk. Participants noted that while there is the Indigenous Strategic Plan (ISP), many units have not taken the time to read and apply this strategic plan to their practices and their work. Some participants mentioned that if there are no structures built in place to recruit and retain Indigenous staff, faculty, and students, then this is not walking the talk. Participants shared that if learning about Indigenous topics and histories is externally motivated, then there won't be any significant change. The desire to learn needs to be internally motivated so that people feel responsible and personally connected to why it's important to learn about Indigenous histories and contemporary realities.

### *Why should people care? – the big “why”*

Participants shared that another challenge is when they encounter colleagues who are not able or willing to connect Indigenous topics, and learning about them, to their own work. Participants also expressed that engaging with Indigenous topics will likely present emotions of fear, guilt, and anxiety, and that sitting with and working with this discomfort is a large part of learning about these topics.

Another main point that was mentioned was the significance of asking critical reflective questions on our work and what we're really doing. *“Are we actually accomplishing something?”* or, *“is this just a checkbox?”* are a couple of questions that people should be asking more often in their practice. One participant shared, *“As non-Indigenous people engaging with Indigenous topics and learning more about this area, we need to be cognizant of what we're claiming and to be careful not to claim on behalf of Indigenous peoples and voices (i.e. the term Indigenization).”*

### *Systemic structures*

Participants shared that there are tensions walking between the institution and communities. In addition, participants mentioned that there are no structures built in place to support relationships with communities and the constant limited resources and time in being able to build relationships in a good way. There is still a lack of Indigenous staff and faculty at the



university which often makes the current ones always at capacity. If there were structures built in place already, retaining and recruiting Indigenous staff, faculty and students wouldn't be a problem.

## **Theme 5: Shifts in the teaching and learning environment since 2007**

### *Original What I Learned in Class Today project made a big impact*

Participants shared that since the original What I Learned in Class Today project was created, they noticed that more faculty were sharing the educational resource in their classrooms. Students from across disciplines have been becoming more familiar with this educational resource and the project has been an important entry point for learning.

### *More conversations and curiosity*

Since the TRC and the original What I Learned in Class Today project, participants noticed that there have been more conversations and curiosity in learning about Indigenous histories and contemporary realities. It has surfaced momentum and questions around Canada's colonial history and ways in which faculty, staff, and students can become more educated in this area. Although there is still much more work to be done, participants shared that they have seen some positive changes.

Some participants also shared that there were Indigenous faculty, staff, students, and communities that have been doing this work at UBC Point Grey long before the TRC and strategic plans came into place. Participants shared that the Indigenous faculty, staff, students, and communities who have been paving the way are also a big reason why there has been momentum. It is about continuing to build this legacy and being encouraged by key people who have created a platform for dialogue.

### *Learning is a continual process*

Participants shared that the trajectory for Indigenous engagement in teaching and learning is gaining momentum, however, we still have long ways to go. Building from the previous point on continuing to build legacy, participants shared there is still a significant need to un-learn systemic and institutional processes that have marginalized Indigenous voices. Some participants recommended that more leadership and units at UBC need to integrate the Indigenous Strategic Plan into budgets as well as building it into policies of hiring, promotion and tenure.

## **Theme 6: Areas of future support**

### *Funding*

One of the key area's participants expressed for more support was funding. This has been a recurring theme that has come up multiple times across all groups. Participants recommended to invest more funds in creating positions that respect Indigenous knowledges into the

university and responds to the TRC calls to action. In addition, participants suggested in response to creating more positions, to hire and value people that bring skills and experiences who have done work with communities. Participants also recommended to bring in more people who value building long-term relationships rather than valuing academic experiences and credentials.

Participants suggested that institutions need to find better ways to balance time and energy spent within communities such as valuing more honorary degrees and putting more funding towards honorariums.

#### *Accountability*

Participants shared that in order for there to be support there needs to be accountability from leadership and decision makers. This means working towards systemic and structural change in order to build existing structures that are able to support and retain Indigenous faculty, staff, and students. Furthermore, participants discussed that it is also about continuing to build the good work people have already done and to not lose momentum. An example of this comes from a quote that was shared amongst the participants: *“when we lose good people, someone else comes in and at times some of that good work gets lost.”* Units across campus need to be able learn how to start and grow these conversations and keep one another accountable to what is said.

#### *More space and opportunities to build relationships*

In addition to the participants recommendations on hiring more people who respect and value Indigenous knowledges and communities, participants also shared that often times policies impede and damage relationships which takes a long time to repair. For future areas of support, participants suggested for the university to provide more space and opportunities to build relationships and spend time with communities. These relationships take time and trust to build, and in order for institutions to value and respect Indigenous knowledges, space must be provided to do this work.

## Group 3 – Alumni and Past Participants

### Theme 1: Experiences in learning about Indigenous topics and support for teaching and learning on this area.

#### *Instructors role makes a key impact for student learning*

Participants shared their own personal learning processes and journeys in learning about Indigenous topics and shared at least one story in how their instructors played a pivotal role. Although there were varying experiences from classes and professors, participants shared that there was at least one Indigenous faculty that mentored and believed in them. In addition, participants shared their experiences of professors who did not navigate Indigenous topics, histories, and realities well in the classroom, and how this impeded on their learning and experiences of being a student at UBC. Some participants shared that instructors did not have cultural competency training or did not have the basic level of knowledge in Indigenous histories, which made it difficult for them to return the class.

#### *Colonialism is still present*

Participants mentioned that in their experiences as UBC alumnus, they still encounter colonialism in their own contexts. There is still a reluctance in learning about Canada's colonial history and there are still various work environments where there is no space for these conversations. Some participants shared that whether it is in the classroom or outside of the classroom, it is still frustrating having to deal with people who are continuing to learn truthful accounts of Indigenous histories. In addition, participants expressed the constant struggle to get other colleagues on board in learning about Indigenous topics and responding to the TRC calls to action.

#### *Looking inward*

A key area that was highlighted amongst participants was the need to look inward before looking outward when it comes to change. Participants shared that in their personal experience of learning about Indigenous histories and contemporary realities was having to face the challenge in their own areas of privilege and implicit bias. Participants discussed that this also brings to the table vulnerability and learning to work in the discomfort when faced with being held accountable. As quoted by a participant, "*decolonizing and un-learning takes time.*"

### Theme 2: How have Indigenous topics been framed in curriculum or workplace

#### *Same people taking on the burden*

Some participants shared they are the only ones in their workplace doing the work in bringing and framing Indigenous topics and often times taking on the emotional labor of this work. Participants also shared that there is still a lot of resistance and defensiveness within work environments and outside of academia. Participants who were previously students at UBC also shared that it was always the same Indigenous faculty that were providing support to students.

### *Placed-based learning*

Some participants had taken courses that had a primary focus on placed-based learning. Participants shared that a key area of learning for them as a student was integrating land-based learning and practices into their courses.

## **Theme 3: Engagements with colleagues and students on Indigenous topics, histories, and realities**

### *Positionality*

A participant who self-identified as a white settler shared that working to understand their own positionality has served to be a bridge between other white colleagues in learning about their identities and Indigenous topics, histories and realities. They also shared understanding and acknowledging positionality is a good starting place and is, in general, an area that is good to know about yourself.

### *Students are coming in with more knowledge than the instructor*

Some participants discussed that throughout their experiences as students taking courses without an Indigenous focus, that they were often the ones that came in with more knowledge than the instructor when it came to Indigenous topics, histories and contemporary realities. Participants shared that although their experiences would vary from classes and instructors, most of their classes that did not have any Indigenous content or Indigenous peers, while they themselves were bringing in the skills and knowledge to discuss Indigenous topics and histories in depth.

### *Isolating*

Some participants shared that being the only ones engaging with Indigenous topics, histories, and knowledges can be very isolating, particularly when there is a lack of non-Indigenous allies within respective contexts. Participants mentioned that Indigenous peoples cannot be the only ones doing this work, and there needs to be more non-Indigenous allies that are able to elevate and center Indigenous perspectives and voices.

## **Theme 4: Challenges**

### *Getting others on board*

Participants discussed that one of the main areas where they feel stuck is inviting their non-Indigenous colleagues in learning about the significance and the importance of Indigenous histories and contemporary realities. Participants shared that the internal work of learning about who they are and how they got to where they are is something that needs to be internally motivated. Participants discussed the need for personal and meaningful experiences in order for people to care about this work, and most of the time people aren't willing to be vulnerable.

### *Not walking the talk*

This theme has been consistent and reoccurring throughout each group. Participants in this focus group discussed that another key area of challenge is having peers, colleagues, and leadership not put words to action. Participants discussed that there is still a large sense of fear, guilt, and resistance when engaging with Indigenous topics and realities. There are still not enough Indigenous faculty, staff, or colleagues in academia and in our workplaces. There is still not enough funding or resources put in place to support Indigenous people.

### *The difficult work in looking internally and vulnerability*

As mentioned previously, participants shared that another area where they often feel challenged is during the difficult work that involves checking our own biases, reflecting on our own identities and privileges, and the willingness to acknowledge areas of failure. Some participants mentioned that knowing they aren't experts in this area and having to sit in the discomfort of learning about Indigenous histories and contemporary realities is an area of vulnerability that is not easy to own up too.

## **Theme 5: Shifts in the teaching and learning environment since 2007**

### *Original What I Learned in Class Today project started a momentum at UBC Point Grey*

The original What I Learned in Class Today project was a student-led initiative that sparked a lot of momentum and conversations amongst Indigenous student voices. Participants shared that this educational resource was an eye-opening experience, especially when listening to the voices of Indigenous students and their experiences in the classroom. Some participants also shared that there were more instructors showing this educational resource in classes.

### *Importance of integrating Indigenous content and histories into K-12 systems*

Participants discussed that for shifts to happen in teaching and learning environments, the K-12 system needs to be able to educate students on Indigenous histories and topics. Although this is already happening to an extent at the K-12 level, participants shared the high importance and significance of the role of the teacher and their approaches to integrating Indigenous content in their teaching. More specifically, moving away from checkboxes and making meaningful connections when teaching Indigenous content are of high importance.

### *The role of the instructor*

Participants emphasized the importance of the instructor's role within the context of teaching and learning. Participants shared that if instructors are willing to be vulnerable in this work and model to students the significance in learning about Indigenous topics, it can make the world of a difference and impact to student learning. Participants also shared their personal experiences of professors who provided support and mentorship when they were students and how much their lives have changed from the impact of that one professor.

### *Representation of Musqueam territory at UBC*

Participants discussed that they have noticed some positive shifts and changes since their time at UBC Point Grey. One key example are the small steps the university has taken in showing that the university sits on Musqueam territory (i.e. the Musqueam flag, Reconciliation Pole, Musqueam street signs, etc.)

## **Theme 6: Areas of future support**

### *Acknowledging there is more to learn*

Participants shared that an area of future support they would like to see is more acknowledgement from non-Indigenous settlers that there is still much more to learn and that there is much more work to be done. Participants expressed that although there has been more momentum with Indigenous engagement, the journey in learning about Indigenous topics and histories continues and is an ongoing process.

### *More training and professional development for instructors and those in leadership positions*

Participants discussed that if people in leadership positions were more aware and engaged with Indigenous topics and realities, it would help support them both individually and within the unit/organization. Participants expressed that if both faculty members and senior administrators were more knowledgeable in this area, the culture of the unit/organization would be more open and receptive. In addition, participants also mentioned that if there is a demand for building more capacity to facilitate these trainings, then organizations must be able to invest resources and funding to those who are doing this work.

### *Learning outside the classroom*

Participants shared that learning about Indigenous histories, topics, and realities is not something that just happens within the classroom but also extends beyond the walls of the classroom and into our social groups. Participants mentioned that for further support, people within social groups such as peers, friends, and families need to be able to also learn about the importance and significance of Indigenous topics. This area of support focuses on reciprocity, such that what is learned in the classroom is meant to be applied and extended to our day-to-day practices and lives.