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**English First Peoples 12:
An Introduction to Indigenous Literatures**

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Born and raised in Burnaby, British Columbia, I have been schooled in a Western Anglo-European epistemology. With parents who are first generation Canadians and grandparents who immigrated from Central and Eastern Europe following the Second World War, I attended Catholic elementary and secondary school, and completed a Bachelor of Arts in Theology and Culture (2017) at a Catholic post-secondary institution before widening my worldview with a Bachelor of Education (2018) at the University of British Columbia and a Master of Arts (2020) at Simon Fraser University. As a result of the trajectory of my early education, my lens is tinged with a polaristic Catholic worldview predicated on community and faith. My latter education, however, has developed upon the basis of intended objectivity and holistic analysis, with a specific focus on Indigenous Literature. I am an English and Career Life Connections teacher at a private Catholic secondary school in East Vancouver, and in 2019, I was contracted by Simon Fraser University to design curriculum for other secondary teachers in the area of Indigenous Literature, with an emphasis on Critical Thinking. Through these experiences, my goal has become to find balance between two distinct worldviews.

To see from one eye
with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing,
and to see from the other eye
with the strengths of Western ways of knowing,
and to use both of these eyes together.

— Elder Albert Marshall (Mi'q̓maw), qtd. in Hall

Though my entire formal educational journey has taken place in the Lower Mainland, British Columbia, I was not exposed to Indigenous ethnohistory and literature until my third year of post-secondary; until 2015, I was not aware of Residential School, the Sixties Scoop, Canadian Colonization, or the Truth and Reconciliation Commission. Consequent to being a settler student, my goal is to expand my repertoire of First Nations socio-cultural sources, and merge this awareness with my primary passion: literary education. In order to effectively and ethically incorporate, explore, and analyze Indigenous studies in a senior secondary English class, students need to be aware of their own worldviews, biases, and epistemologies. The new B.C. curriculum strongly encourages teachers to teach First Nations content while actively incorporating the First Peoples Principles of Learning into the classroom. As an educator, my goal is to contribute to this dialogue, as I believe that while students need to be exposed to the Western canon, they also need to consider the continuing effects of imperialism and colonialism in Canada through an active, sustained engagement with Indigenous literatures.

Context is vital to understanding...
especially given how colonial government policies
have combined with widespread popular stereotypes
and everyday enacted practise
to degrade and attempt to entirely eliminate Indigenous peoples...

Colonialism is as much about
the symbolic diminishment of Indigenous peoples
as the displacement of physical presence.

— Daniel Heath Justice (Cherokee), *Why Indigenous Literatures Matter* (xviii)

A literature course, such as English First Peoples 12 (EFP12), that accomplishes this goal exposes students to Indigenous content and Principles of Learning, and has students experimenting with composition, creative writing, literary studies, new media, and spoken language so that they grow in literacy as readers and writers. As a teacher, I strongly believe that when we read and write, we have the chance to create, imagine, and explore the tragic beauty of the past, the challenges of the present, and the possibilities of the future. Through literacy, we also build community, experience culture, and investigate values. Through literacy, doors open—not only to other worlds, but also to our own visceral, genuine past and present world. As a result of this process, students explore facets of their own individual identities. “All that we are is story,” says Richard Wagamese, an Ojibwe author and journalist based in Canada. A central theme he outlines is story, and the connection between story and identity. EFP12 builds upon this theme in order to explore the relationship between the stories of others and the stories of ourselves, between the stories we tell and the stories that we need to hear.

This course begins with articulating what is familiar: identifying the land, the culture, the language, and the protocols of where we physically and metaphorically stand in the world. Once students have an idea of their own worldviews, they can explore the protocols of others. The first unit focuses on *Self Awareness: Basic Positionality, Place, Time*, with the objectives, content, and competencies of this unit’s lesson sequence scaffolded so that students can, by unit’s end, be able to autonomously analyze Indigenous texts and connect them to concepts of identity. The scaffolding of sequence in the first unit begins with an introduction of concepts; students have opportunities to apply abstract ideas to practical situations, then transition into specific technical skills, to context, and finally, to meaning. As with all the units, each lesson builds upon the one before, with all lessons designed with the Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to include all students and adaptations. With this sequence in mind, the second unit focuses on *Social Responsibility*, wherein students acknowledge the significance of context surrounding texts and individuals. They learn that up until very recently, Indigenous texts have not been supported by educational curriculum. They will explore the stigmas attached to those texts contemporarily as well as through the history of colonization in Canada, while working towards an understanding of decolonization and justice. In the third unit—*Positionality, Complex Identity, Holistic Being*—students articulate and value self-awareness, identifying biases that influence worldview. The penultimate unit, entitled *Reciprocal Relationships*, scaffolds for an inquiry project, an individual project predicated on personal interest and social connection. This project follows five steps: Interaction, Clarification, Questioning, Design, and Share, wherein students explicitly consider the connections across time, land, and space, and recognize the connections between all peoples. The final unit, *Past and Present Intersect: Future Responsibility*, creates space for Indigenous epistemologies, pedagogies, and stories, while recognizing the past, current, and future impacts of colonization.

People need to learn from the past,

to know our stories,
to be reminded of those who worked for the survival of our nations
in the early years of settler colonization.

— Janice Toulouse (Ojibwe)

These five themes each correspond with the First Peoples Principles of Learning, with a continuous emphasis placed on “learning [as] holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place),” and “learning requires exploration of one’s identity.” Ultimately, a course like EFP12 coaches students on how to be aware of individual biases and stereotypes, and personal ways of looking at the world. Students learn to be culturally sensitive in a culturally diverse landscape, while strengthening their literacy. Through examining how all these concepts intersect with ideas surrounding justice, ethics, responsibility, and nationalism, students learn how to transfer ideals into the future.

Stories operate
as different entryways,
foundations,
beginning points...
as centers.

— Michele Lacombe, “Leanne Betasamosake Simpson's Decolonial Aesthetics”

By using stories as centres to ground both what we know and what we don't, this course investigates what it means to be human. As the designer of the course, I had to consider these concepts of social justice and responsibility for myself, and become more aware of my own conscious and subconscious biases. Literature has been my constant companion, as it has taught me about the benefits of both reflecting inwards and exploring worlds other than my own. Therefore, in creating this course, my goal has become not only to find balance between two distinct worldviews, but to see with “two eyes” (Bartlett). This acts as a throughline in EFP12, wherein students explore how to adopt this approach to their own learning, while also critically and creatively analysing dystopian futurisms. Above all my goal in this course is to challenge the deeply mistaken yet persistent idea of a ‘vanishing people.’ Focusing on “Indigenous futurisms” helps in contesting this idea, and students can then challenge and explore the questions: how do we conceptualize Indigenous futurisms, and how do we talk about the end of the world for a people whose world, as they had known it, has ended?

SOURCES

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