

Discussions Wrapped in Stories: Mitch Huguenin

Jenny:

Welcome everyone. Today, we're welcoming Mitchell Huguenin, educational developer at Trent for a discussion on facilitation. Welcome Mitch.

Mitchell Huguen:

Thank you so much, Jenny. I'm thrilled to be here to chat with you this morning.

Jenny:

Before we start, could you maybe tell us a little bit more about yourself?

Mitchell Huguen:

I'd love to. Yeah, so first and foremost, I identify as a proud member of the Metis Nation and hail from

Penetanguishene, Ontario. I've held various different roles at Trent University, but currently I'm one of the team members on the Center for Teaching and learning team. I have a role of indigenous pedagogy expert or indigenous pedagogy designer, so I'm one of the ed developers that focuses specifically on indigenous pedagogy. It's a very interesting and unique role.

I do a little bit of teaching out of the [inaudible 00:01:07] School and the School of Education, just part-time teaching there. Then I also teach at Durham college in Oshawa. I've been teaching there for a few years, also focusing again on, in every one of those in instances on indigenous focused courses. I don't think I'd ever claim to be an expert, but people seem to think I know something about indigenous pedagogies and education, and so it's what I enjoy talking about and learning about, so I'm really excited to be here to chat about that topic with you today.

Jenny:

I'm very excited to hear from you as well. I'm excited to learn. Today, as I mentioned, we want to talk a little bit about the facilitation aspect of a course, and in the context of where we're speak from, we're assuming that instructors don't really have a lot of leeway perhaps in changing the design of the course and that they've just been tasked with facilitating the course in term and have minimal impact on perhaps the content or the overall design and structure, but we thought that it would be great to still have a conversation in terms of just general education and unlearning and rethinking about approaches to facilitating a course. From your perspective or your experiences, what are some decolonized or indigenized approaches that one could take to facilitate a course, if they had a little bit more of a holistic approach to adjusting how their course might be delivered?

Mitchell Huguen:

Mm-hmm (affirmative), yeah, that's a really great, great question. I think, I think we could spend a number of hours discussing that question and maybe even build a course out of that

Discussions Wrapped in Stories: Mitch Huguenin

question for faculty. But definitely I think the very first place that folks ought to begin is with some introspections, some critical self-reflection.

What I've noticed in my short time in this role is that when I engage with faculty, I never know where they might land on this spectrum of knowledge, right? Because learning about indigenous people, our histories, our modern experiences, even in education, our experiences there, young people are only beginning to be taught about those things now in school. That's a very recent happening, I think, since the Truth and Reconciliation Commissions' 94 Calls to Action were released. It's like 2015, so I would say that the vast majority of Canadians fall on this spectrum somewhere in terms of knowing perhaps a great deal about people like me or perhaps not knowing a lot about people like me and maybe the way that they learned about indigenous peoples was very limited or perhaps they learned about our histories in a way that wasn't completely honest. You read some of the old textbooks that were available to young people even 20 years ago, even 10 years ago, and you see a lot of misinformation there.

So long story short, I think the best starting point is with the educator themselves to do that self-reflection, to determine certainly their own positionality, but their own level of understanding about indigenous peoples and indigenous matters, because I don't think you can get involved in decolonial work or indigenizing work without having that foundation first. That's where I would suggest most people start self-reflection and then a lot of learning.

I think that the Truth and Reconciliation Commission is also a good place to begin, if you're not familiar with that, to learn about the TRC, to learn about the legacy of residential schools in Canada, but also the legacy of colonialism in Canada. That's an ongoing legacy.

Then I think it's also important to balance that with an understanding or appreciation for the hard work that's being done even today by indigenous people's community people, elders, knowledge holders, leaders, and scholars to bring about a better awareness about who we are and where we come from and where we're going, and so that's important for indigenous people living in Canada, as well as average Canadians. That's where one can begin.

Then I would say in terms of moving forward from there, one really important, I guess, one really important pillar of indigenous pedagogy would be staying mindful that our students are more than just empty vessels, and in fact, they're not really empty vessels at all. From an indigenous pedagogical perspective, we're not a jug of water filling up all these empty go glasses, right, for lack of a better metaphor. Our students are already arriving in our classrooms with so much experience and so much knowledge. It's not just their minds that we have to be exercising. It's every dimension of the student, every dimension of the person. We have to think about our learners in a more holistic way, so not just the mental, but the physical, the emotional and the spiritual. That ties into medicine wheel teachings that I'm not an expert on, but just knowing that our students are more than empty minds to be filled.

Discussions Wrapped in Stories: Mitch Huguenin

I think that building off of that in terms of indigenous pedagogy, maybe this is something I should have said at the start. There's not one hard, true, fast way to do it. Indigenous peoples are incredibly diverse throughout the world. Even within Canada, we're diverse. And so indigenous pedagogies are quite diverse as well. So what I'm speaking to are commonalities, right? I think a lot of diverse peoples, indigenous people would agree that a holistic approach and thinking about our students, our learners as whole people made of, comprised of these four dimensions is something I think most folks would agree about.

Then from, from there, it's a lot of other commonalities shared among indigenous folks, right? For our educators who, as you say, Jenny, don't have a lot of flexibility around what they might be able to do with their courses in terms of content, at least, I would say that some important ways you could indigenize a course beyond just the content might involve doing some land-based work, so bringing students outside and having them learn on the land about the land and perhaps even in a specific place. There's a slight difference between land-based education and place-based education. I think that place based education ties into the region's history and also tying into who those first peoples are who've stewarded the lands in that region and what their stories might be.

And so that involves working collaboratively and building relationships with local peoples and incorporating local knowledge, so that might involve inviting an elder or local knowledge holder to be a part of a classroom dialogue, to have an elder review the course that you've designed, or if you haven't designed the course, maybe review the assessments or be involved, like I say, within discussions with students. Creating those collaborative opportunities is a really good thing to do. Takes time to build those relationship, and of course those relationships can't be one sided. We have to honor the time that our community partners are putting forth, so whether that's an elder or knowledge holder or community expert historian, whatever it might be, got to make sure to honor the time that they're providing you.

But I would say that that's a really good way to indigenize a course as well, especially if we're talking about online courses, right? The online world, the virtual world is this landless territory where we get stuck in front of a screen, sort of like we are right now. It's always nice catching up, but when we're behind a computer screen, there's something less authentic and there's something less human as compared to being together in the same physical space. It doesn't feel as real when you're work working remotely, so you have to figure out ways to make that experience feel more authentic, right? One way might be encouraging students to get out onto the land when they have the opportunity to do so. That's a good part of self-care as well. If you can create those land-based and/or place-based opportunities, that's really, really great.

Then depending on if your course is synchronous or asynchronous, involving community, community people, and definitely local knowledge. Yeah, yeah. Those are some of my pillars of doing or practicing indigenous pedagogy and indigenizing your course outside of just the content.

Discussions Wrapped in Stories: Mitch Huguenin

Jenny:

I've heard a little bit about sharing circles or circle work. Is that something that if someone was in a position where they did have a little bit more control about their content and they were working to decolonize it and they can appropriately set that up, is that something that could work in a virtual context? Can you maybe explain a little bit what that might look like?

Mitchell Huguen:

Yeah, yeah, totally. In that case, if an instructor does have slightly more control over how their course is set up and content, assessment, all of that sort of stuff, I think doing or rather facilitating a sharing circle is a great idea. I would strongly recommend that any faculty member interested in doing that become quite learned beforehand, definitely be involved in a sharing circle yourself. I would say on numerous occasions, be involved and try to be involved in sharing circles that are facilitated by indigenous peoples that do have knowledge about how those circles work.

I would use, this is an interesting little rule that I use for myself, and this could be sharing circles, this could be any indigenization work you're doing in your course. If you're about to do something that's new and just before doing it, you feel, "Hmm, if an elder walked into my classroom, would I feel, or entered my virtual space, would I feel comfortable about that in terms of what I'm doing? Would I feel comfortable if they observed this activity?" If the answer is yes, then you may very well be on the right track, and that's a good thing. If the answer is, "Comme ci, comme sa-ish, comfortable-ish or absolutely no," then I would say, take some extra time to think about what you're doing and do some more learning. Then again, going back to collaboration, might be good to involve someone who has been more deeply involved in sharing circles, right? If you're not a total expert, you can always invite someone in who may be an expert, whether that's inviting them into the classroom or into your virtual space or even in terms of when you're creating your course.

I think for me, sharing circles have always worked really well in traditional face-to-face environments, but they can work virtually too. They're a little bit awkward when it's virtual, because you don't always have a circular space and not always are your students going to be as available as they might be in person. By that, I just mean some students prefer to turn off their cameras or step away from their computer. This isn't a synchronous live course, right. But I have held sharing circles in those live courses over Zoom. They can still work quite effectively. But even in those cases where you're facilitating a circle virtually, I would say still do that prior learning before holding a sharing circle. I say that also, because they're meant to be spaces where students can express themselves bravely and feel that their contributions to the circle aren't going to be critiqued or judged. That's the point, right? To be as authentic as you can without the fear of being judged by others.

Then of course your role in the circle as a facilitator is not just to guide the conversation, but you are also a part of the circle. That's the beauty of a circle, right? There's no head of the

Discussions Wrapped in Stories: Mitch Huguenin

circle, so as an educator, you're involved too. You are required to speak authentically and to share with your students just as they're sharing with each other and with you.

Now, in terms of an asynchronous course using a sharing circle, I've never done that, but that's not to say that it can't be done. You'd have to be creative in terms of how you do that. I've heard rumblings that there are different technologies available today that you can leverage in terms of creating those opportunities for students to share. It might not be live necessarily, but students can create videos where they're sharing and then post the videos, and then you can navigate this virtual circle of posted videos.

I think in an asynchronous, excuse me, in an asynchronous course, it could be possible, but it would have to be done creatively. Then in a live, online course, you almost definitely could. You'll still have to be creative. It won't be as ideal as a face-to-face set up, but you can still leverage that pedagogical approach, and in my experience, you can do so quite effectively. I've found the students really enjoy those opportunities, right, because they're able to express deeply. It's an engaging opportunity, right? You're expressing your thoughts, but also your feelings and lingering question. It's great because students can share as much or as little as they want so it's a very natural way to express knowledge, yeah.

Jenny:

That's amazing. Thanks for sharing that. Lots to think about. I wanted to ask you next, how could you or how could one facilitate or promote a learning environment that is culturally safe for an inclusive of indigenous students, especially in the virtual context?

Mitchell Huguen:

Hmm. Yeah. Yeah, so I think it's especially important to understand indigenous students. They, I don't know if I should say they or we, because I'm doing graduate work myself, so I'll say we, because I'm technically an indigenous student currently. We choose to identify in any number of different ways. Some of us may be very open and vocal about who we are and where we come from and others may not be. There are so many different reasons why that is the case. I would say right off the bat in terms of working with indigenous students, never assume anything about your student group, because there may be indigenous students in your course and there may not be, but I would say always just assume there are indigenous students there. That's maybe the only assumption you can make.

The other assumptions that have been made that can create challenges or do harm are these assumptions that, "Well, if I am working with indigenous students, they are experts on their culture, they are experts on indigenous history, intergenerational trauma, experts on modern experiences of indigenous people, and I can leverage what they know and they can be the voice for all indigenous peoples in my classroom." That is a big responsibility to lay on the shoulders of any individual, let alone a student in your classroom. And so I would say assuming that they can be experts is very bad assumption to make. I would encourage faculty of to avoid making that kind of assumption.

Discussions Wrapped in Stories: Mitch Huguenin

It's always really good to give your indigenous students, if you know who your indigenous students are, give your indigenous students the opportunity to become leaders in the classroom, whether that's the traditional or virtual classroom room, to become leaders. If they feel encouraged or if they feel like they would strongly wish to share about their experiences as an indigenous person, I say 100% give of them the platform to do that, but never place that responsibility on them. If they step up and wish to, green light, but otherwise don't make those kinds of assumptions that they know everything.

But definitely in terms of working with indigenous students and creating an online classroom environment that is sensitive to the different topics that might come up in terms of, again, in terms of just indigenous past, present and future, I would say the one thing that I encounter frequently with faculty is this idea that our conversation about fill in the blank, whether it's residential schools or the '60s coup, if you're talking about the War of 1812, you could be talking about the Wet'suwet'en water defenders, land defenders. You could be talking about any number of things, but the problems arise when faculty treat those issues as aspects of a long forgotten or distant past or treat those topics as occurring in far away places or treat those topics as issues affecting people who are very different from us. That's not reality.

The histories that we've experienced here in Canada as indigenous peoples linger. We're still feeling the ripple effects of those histories today, so that history is very real. A lot of that history is very recent. Some indigenous people live in remote communities, but we're all living here in Canada. Many, many of our nations and communities exist very close to where we're going to be working and teaching. Then most definitely bearing in mind that indigenous peoples aren't some other, "other" group like your students, the students in your classroom may be a part of that people group, that population, the indigenous population here in Canada, so you should never assume, "Well, let's talk about these people or these topics related to these people," as if there's no connection to our small group, because there most definitely is. It could be a very immediate connection. You'll find that very quickly when your indigenous students say, "Actually that happened to my parents or that happened to me or that's occurring in my community." You'll discover very quickly, these are real present issues happening here and now to the students that I'm working directly with.

So approaching those topics and especially sensitive or challenging or provocative topics with a kind heart and an open mind is really important. And when you know that you are going to be covering a topic in your course that's likely to evoke some really strong emotions, prepare your students for those conversations ahead of time. When you do begin those conversations, make yourself available as a support person for all of your students.

In my role, certainly with the Center for Teaching and Learning, but as well as a part-time faculty member and as an indigenous person, myself, I'm always thinking about our indigenous students and how to best serve them. Most definitely when you are engaging in these conversations, you keep those students in mind all of the time.

Discussions Wrapped in Stories: Mitch Huguenin

But something that I sometimes forget to mention is we have to think about our non-indigenous students too when we're engaging in conversations about any number of related topics. For our non-indigenous students, it may be the first time that they're learning about these things. They may feel a great deal of shame and sadness, confusion about what their ancestors may have been associated with, this legacy of colonialism. We don't really want our students, we don't want any of our students walking away from the classroom feeling shameful. We want our students leaving the classroom or the virtual classroom feeling inspired to do something, to make positive change. And so approaching things in a very kind way, in a very supportive way, I would say is important.

Our indigenous students too, just because they're indigenous doesn't mean they know all of this already or have some prior knowledge. Many of our indigenous students are coming into our learning spaces without knowing a lot about their people's experience in Canada or experience with colonization. And so even for me, when I began my first degree at Trent, I didn't know a lot about colonialism in Canada or its many different effects or impacts on people like me. And so I think being held up as an expert back then, it's like, "Gosh, I'm definitely not an expert. I don't know any of this." And so that was difficult for me. And I think it's difficult for a lot of our students when they encounter that.

But as well, what's challenging is as an indigenous student learning about difficult topics for the first time, so difficult topics, being those related to the challenging experiences indigenous peoples have had and are still experiencing, what do you do with that new information, right? What do you do with those new feelings? What do you do with those questions that you have? Who do you go to? You're learning about a legacy that's been very damaging. You can start making links to your personal experience, your family experience, your community experience, even your nation's experience in Canada.

And so we want students to feel that they can share about that with the group, with their classmates and with you as an instructor in a safe way where they're supported, but that they can share bravely and be vulnerable. That goes back to how effective sharing circles can be.

But again, doing all of this in a virtual space is really tricky because there's something very human about looking after one of another when you're all together. But if I notice that one of my students is visibly being affected by what we're discussing, I can't reach through my computer screen and offer them support and say, "Hey, are you okay? Do you want to step out of the class and have quick chat? Are you doing okay?" You can't really do that in a virtual space. You have to be even more aware. And so it takes a lot of practice. It takes a lot of mental and emotional prep work, both for the instructor and for the students. And so always giving your students a big heads up when you're about to have those conversations.

And then lastly, maybe I should have started with this point, but creating really good, clear expectations from the very start, like day one of the course. I've shared in the past something

Discussions Wrapped in Stories: Mitch Huguenin

that I do is I leverage the seven sacred teachings. Those are good values that I live by in order to move through life in a positive way.

Now, these are values based teachings that I can't encourage everyone to access because they're a part of indigenous knowledge, right? You can't necessarily adopt or appropriate those teachings without some very significant learning and guidance and involvement in working with community. But for non-indigenous faculty who are just starting, you can create similar expectations at the start of your course that are based in respect and care for one another, sharing in a good way, non-judgment.

I think the respect piece is really important because when you dive into topics that generate a lot of different opinions, especially heated opinions, it sets the conversation up for failure sometimes if students feel like they want to argue with one another or defend other members of the class. You don't want students to go on the attack and you don't want people to feel defensive because of that. I would say setting up expectations that make it very clear, "We're going to have a respectful conversation. We're going to care for and look out for one another. We're not going to judge or critique one another. We're going to share based on good sense of moving forward together not challenging one another."

That's a really good way to begin, I think, and then there are most definitely better. There are folks that are far better equipped to teach about trauma informed teaching than myself. I'm not an expert at all in trauma informed teaching, but definitely learning about and building some knowledge around trauma informed teaching is something I strongly recommend if you're working with indigenous students or working with indigenous content in your course, just based on what we've already talked about, a lot of those topics being pretty heavy topics, provocative topics, even as an instructor, whether you're indigenous or non-indigenous. I keep talking about the students, but as an instructor, you need to be sure you're taking care of yourself too, because leading conversations around these difficult topics can be emotionally exhausting, right, especially for indigenous instructors. So being, being aware of that and taking care of yourself, I think is really important too.

Jenny:

Oh, thank you very much for that deep explanation on how we can support indigenous students, non-indigenous students, and even ourselves as instructors in the learning when we're discussing challenging or heavy topics. Thank you. Is there anything else you'd like to discuss with our listeners today or mention?

Mitchell Huguen:

Yeah, I think that, I noted at the very beginning that, although I'm in a role where for folks might consider me an expert on these topics, I'm definitely not. I'm still learning a lot myself. I think that most folks you'll want to connect with whether they're members of your teaching community or local knowledge holders, elders, I don't think any member of any indigenous

Discussions Wrapped in Stories: Mitch Huguenin

community is going to say, "I'm an expert on all of these things." Because that's part of our teachings, right, humility and the lifelong learning spirit, so you can't really ever be an expert.

However, there are folks who are a part of your institution's community who are, whether or they identify as experts or not, they're very knowledgeable and they might specialize in this kind of work. At Trent, I always make myself available as a resource to faculty. There are a lot of really phenomenal institutional resources, not just me, but many, many different amazing resources if you're interested in doing this work, the work of indigenizing and decolonizing.

But also being aware too that, I talked a lot about how there's challenges when working virtually, how it's so much better sometimes to be in person, working with students if you're doing this kind of work. But one really awesome part about the virtual learning space is you can access so many different resources and those could be live resources like connecting with an elder who lives a thousand and kilometers away. They can connect instantly through the virtual connectivity of the modern day.

The other thing too, is there are so many great online resources. One that comes to mind that I'll encourage folks to access is the BC Campus Indigenization Guides. Those are really, really phenomenal resources, great for folks who are just beginning to learn about these topics, and then for folks who are interested in indigenizing their course design and pedagogical approach. So definitely take the time, if you haven't already, to search out those online resources that are available and free. That's the best part, they're free. They're right there sitting, waiting for you to take a look at. And then from there moving on to connect with people like me. As I say, I'm always happy to chat with people. Sometimes those one-on-one conversations, that's when the best work occurs. Those are not one offs. Typically, I'll say this is the start of a conversation, and then we meet several more times after that to discuss the faculty member's learning, their progress and how their course is evolving and all that good stuff.

That's really all I wanted to add there in conclusion was knowing that you're not alone and you can access a lot of really awesome, a lot of awesome people and awesome resources. While the people might be, as we were discussing at the beginning of our conversation, while the people might be busy with a lot of different projects on the go, be patient. They will be, hopefully, interested in working with you. In the meantime, there's so many great online resources that you can take a look at and learn from. I think that's what I'd like to end on, yeah.

Thank you so much, Mitch. This has been a really informative session. I'm so glad that you agreed to talk with us today. There's a lot of great principles and approaches and even a mindset on how we can approach virtual teaching and thinking about it in different ways that make for brave, great places for learning. Thank you very much.

Thank you. [foreign 00:00:40:08]