

Discussions Wrapped in Stories: Stephanie Ehret

Speaker 1:

Thank you very much, Dr. Ehret, for joining us today and discussing your course, and what approaches you took to decolonize or indigenize it, and your journey involved with that. To begin, could you give a short overview of your course and why you decided you needed to make some changes to it?

Dr. Ehret:

Certainly. Well, thanks for having me. The course is a blend between criminology and philosophy. It straddles the two areas. And it's on responding to violence. As a background, I'm a critical criminologist. We're always looking at relationships of power, dynamics of power that are happening in society, and then more specifically in the criminal justice system.

Because it is responding to violence and it's in the areas of criminology and philosophy, I need to very

much look at the criminal justice system and ... Which it is, arguably, a system that operates in the modality, if you will, or the means. It uses punishment, and so certainly that can be seen as one form of violence. We need to be talking about the criminal justice responses, but also knowing that the state ... The criminal justice system as the strong arm of the state perpetuates violences that happen in society, one of those being colonization. You just have to look at the statistic in the criminal justice system to know that indigenous peoples, broadly speaking, highly, highly, highly overrepresented in the criminal justice system.

In looking at this course, I knew that I needed to be talking about criminal justice responses and how

the system responds to violence in society, whether they a bar brawl, or sexual violence, or other forms of violence that happen in society. But then, I also needed to be talking about the system as a part of

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the state doing violence to its people, and particularly indigenous peoples. I approached it knowing I needed to be talking about how the system responds to violence in society, but also how it is doing violence and perpetuating it.

I'm not an indigenous person I'm not indigenous, and so I very much wanted to approach it with an

open mind and looking for new ideas. It's a new course. I was building it from from the bottom up.

What I decided to do is put it in three big categories and that we would have different units in the course and tackle it that way.

The first one, and this is one in particular, although it's the foundational piece, is I wanted to talk about why we have the justice system there in the first place. What is justice? I have a lot of background through my studies and so on looking at Western, like European approaches to justice, thinking of the philosophers Kant, and Aristotle, and so on, but I didn't have much background in terms of indigenous peoples and different groups and how they look at justice. And it'll be not the same everywhere or with each group, but I wanted to ... I don't know enough about this. I need to learn.

I started speaking with people, both indigenous and non-indigenous, but really trying to connect indigenous people, so attending ... At that time, a few seminars popped up. I attended those and spoke with ... Actually, one of the educational developers at ... Or the Trent Online developers had an idea to use Nanabush tales, which I had never heard of, but ... I started looking into that more.

I spoke with an indigenous developer. I'm actually talking more about process than I am about the actual content about this. This led me to the content. I spoke with an indigenous education developer at Trent and said, "What about using something like Nanabush tales? Would that be okay? I'm not an indigenous person. I don't know what these are used for and what circumstances and so on." He said yes. He said but getting permission to use them, and setting it up in a course in a way that they know that I'm not indigenous, but I'm presenting it as indigenous content and that kind of thing. So, just being very transparent about where I'm coming from with it. So, I do have that kind of thing in the course, like little dropdowns that they can actually ... It's an online course, so the students can click on that and learn more. We're still building. It's still being done.

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I looked online. Actually, the Trent Online person suggested this website has Nanabush tales. I spoke with the person who owns the website, and he said it was fine to use it, and actually donated a couple of books, which was also wonderful. I have this permission to use them.

When I talk in that first section in the course about justice and what is justice, I can incorporate not just that one Western lens, which is overdone and incorporate the ... And not just an indigenous one, but the indigenous one. The Trent, where it's located, the Anishinaabe lens, using the Nanabush tales. That first you unit is very much just like, "What are we trying to do when we respond to violence? Do we want justice? If we want justice, what does that look like?"

Then, the next units, the next ... There's three units. The first one's on justice, broadly speaking. The next one is on modalities. I've broken it down into three, criminal justice, restorative justice, and social justice. Then, the last unit is case studies, so using the material from the first two units, looking at three particular forms of violence. I selected domestic violence, drinking and driving. Then, I looked at sentencing circles, which ...

So, I'm differentiating. Restorative justice is not indigenous justice. Not the same thing. And certainly if you're looking at something like sentencing circles, breaking that down, it happens near the end of the justice system. It's very much you in the state-based criminal justice system, and it's happening at the stage of sentencing, but it's an approach that has been developed as a way of trying to redress and deal with overrepresentation in the criminal justice system, but certainly it's not a panacea. It's not a final solution. We're looking at it critically using the material from the first two units.

That's the development of the course so far. It's very much three units using the first two to look at the case studies, and then trying to thread throughout. How I'm using those Nanabush tales is ... It is it's an online course, so they enter the module, and there will be ... Some weeks there'll be a thought experiment and some weeks there'll be a Nanabush tale to get them thinking about the material that's going to be in that particular module.

Speaker 1:

Could you give a short explanation for those of us who might not know what a Nanabush tale is?

Dr. Ehret:

Nanabush tales are sacred teachings. They're stories about living a good life. They're values-based stories and with aspects of reciprocity in them. Nanabush has been me described to me as a trickster, and one that's sometimes doing good, but sometimes doing mischief. As a trickster, he's sometimes doing mischief and breaking rules, but Nanabush also has the power to create life and the power to protect it. Through these tales, the stories about Nanabush, we learn about what it means to live the good life. That's how they've been described to me.

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They have in them practical lessons. They're practical lessons for persons as they're listening to the stories. And these stories have been passed down through the oral traditions. So for individuals, as they listen to them, they have practical lessons. But, they've also been described to me as narratives about life and that they have social messages in them. There's a depth of knowledge in them, and experience, and history, and tradition that is built into them and as they've been past pass through generations.

So again, Nanabush is a trickster, but again, the stories have this depth to them about living the good life. The adventures that Nanabush goes on are to teach about thinking about what's right and what's wrong in different circumstances, and, again, teaching about how to live the good life. They are tales that are to be approached with respect and humility. Certainly for myself, as a non-indigenous person, I'm additionally mindful of this, realizing that they're not my stories, but I've been given certainly permission to use them. As a non-indigenous person, I'm additionally mindful of that.

My hope is, for using them in the course, is that for the indigenous students who are in it, I'm hoping it'll be welcoming for them, familiar even maybe for some, and that it will be maybe like a warm hug or sitting by a comforting or warm fire having that involved or as part of the course. Then, for the non-indigenous students, I'm hoping it will broaden their knowledge, broaden way of thinking about these tenets and ideals that we're talking about in the course like justice and what does it mean to live the good life. I'm hoping for the non-indigenous students that they're open to this, that they're willing to approach it with open hearts and open minds. It's certainly part of the design of the course to try encourage them to do that.

I do plan, like once it's all developed, to have somebody look at it, either the same in indigenous education developer or maybe a knowledge keeper or have somebody look at it and say, "Yeah, this is ... Change this," or, "Include that," or, you know?

Speaker 1:

Does Trent have a connection with a knowledge keeper or an elder in your community?

Dr. Ehret:

Yeah, yeah. I think I can access one through this education developer, he had said. And if not, then I'll seek one out.

Speaker 1:

That's excellent. When you were working on developing your course, what were some unexpected challenges or what points did you feel maybe less confident in what steps to take? And how did you overcome that? As someone who might be doing this for the first time, a lot of people have the same kind of trepidations about how to properly integrate this type of material with-

Dr. Ehret:

Yeah. Kind of two things come to mind for that. Firstly, certainly talking about

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criminological material, we're ... And as a criminologist, we're pretty used to talking about the state responses, like the institutional responses, and harms that are done through them. Certainly, I have in past courses talked about things like the starlight tours and things that have happened done by the police to indigenous people. Even in those classes, in-person classes, having discussions with the students after and finding, for the non-indigenous students, quite a few were unaware that that kind of thing had been happening.

I have that kind of background experience, and so I'm keeping that in mind when I'm developing it. This may be unfamiliar material for some of the students. Then for others, they'll be very well aware. Indigenous students may be highly aware. It's not new to them. So, keeping that in mind.

What I did was ... Again, it was just opportunity. When I was beginning to the course, there were some seminars and workshops that I had gone to. Somebody asked, at one of them that I was attending, "If I wanted to speak with students about X, Y, and Z, what books would you recommend?" And the woman offered several titles. I was, "Well, there's a good starting point." So, I looked at those. One's Braiding Sweetgrass. I've incorporated that into it, as well as some other material.

When I had developed the syllabus, just a draft that had the readings, and I had listed the different thought experiments and Nanabush tales, I took that to the indigenous education developer and had him look through it. Or he looked through it for me and then offered some feedback. I had like a website there. He was like, "Yes, that's a great one to include. Maybe don't include this one, but here's another." He offered suggestions as well. It really wasn't my intent to ask him to look up readings or anything like that. I didn't want to put that work on his plate. But, bringing what I had and having him look through it was great. He offered feedback on that.

Even for some of the readings, again, and the Nanabush tales, it was ... He suggested like, "Just make it clear where you're coming from, and that's a good starting point." As long as I'm transparent that I'm finding my way through this ... Just to be clear on that and that'll be helpful. And it's iterative, too. I don't see the course as being finalized. Once it's developed and even after we run it, I'll be very interested in the feedback from the students. Certainly willing to change things as we go forward.

Speaker 1:

Would you be able to comment either on your assignments or perhaps on how you're structuring, if you have online, asynchronous discussions and discussion boards, or synchronous sessions over video conferencing, how you're going to potentially create a safe and brave environment for your learners? Because some of these topics are clearly quite challenging and could get quite close to some people. Do you have any strategies to address this in your assignment design or your facilitation approaches?

Dr. Ehret:

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I do. A few things there. It is sensitive subject matter, particularly for those who have lived experience. And for others, it's challenging to hear about. Absolutely. I always introduce ... Even when I'm doing my own introductions, I talk about it is sensitive, it's tough material, and it's really important to do self-care, take care of yourselves. I give ideas what I like to do, get away from the computer and the books as best I can, my nature walks and cycling, and that kind of thing. Even just talking about that, I think, hopefully, hearing the instructor say that can open a dialogue for that.

Then, I know in-person courses, you can see the reactions with the students and navigate the discussions as they happen and remind them throughout to keep it professional, keep it sensitive. Remember, there's people who have experience of these things, or any experience with criminal justice, whether if they've been criminalized, or if they've been victimized, or both. So, there's that part, just staying from the beginning self-care is really important and reminding them throughout that that's important and to take care of themselves.

Then, in terms of the assignment setup, for this particular course, it's intended to run asynchronously, but I do have a synchronous component that I'm going to include which is just a weekly casual, informal ... It's not a lecture drop-in. I called it The Philosophers Hub where the students, if they want to, can just come and ask questions or chat with myself or with their classmates. I mean, I would be there just if they need to mull over the ideas, to talk about their experience in going through the material. So, there's that. It's optional, so marks aren't attached to that.

Then, in terms of the actual assignments, I sometimes do have discussion boards and that kind of thing online. But for this, I've decided to use journals. And to give them choice, within the journal assignments ... I'll provide the topics at the beginning of the semester and then they can choose which ones they want to do, but they don't have to do them all. There's choice within that, which hopefully will help with it being sensitive subject matter if there's one topic they really don't want to get into too much for their own wellness.

The journals are just for the instructor to see. They're not going to be distributed to the entire class or available. Then, I do have just the standard tests, which will have multiple choice and an essay question, that kind of thing. Oh, and a written assignment. The written assignment will have a reflective component in it that asks them to draw material from journals and just think about ... Particularly if it's a journal from near the beginning of the course, has the material ... have they shifted in their stance or their view and that kind of thing. There's a reflective component in it through both the journals and the written assignment, not as much in the tests.

Speaker 1:

What advice would you provide to others who are trying to undertake similar processes in their-

Dr. Ehret:

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Think about where they're coming from. That self-reflective piece that I've talked about asking the students to do in their journals and their written assignment, I think as an instructor we have to do that, too, so where we're coming from, our privileges, our biases, and that kind of thing. I always start the semester for the students, and then a reminder for myself, too. I go back to Howard Becker. He's wrote an article back in the sixties, *Whose Side Are We On?* I always think, "Okay, remember, I'm a critical criminologist. We are talking about harms done within society, but also within the criminal justice system, and how social disadvantages ..." "We're supposed to be on the side," Howard Becker says, "of those who are disadvantaged, and particularly when injustices are happening."

So, remind myself at the beginning like ... "Remember, it's not picking sides, per se," is what Howard Becker had said, but just remember that my own social location, and then that we're talking about disadvantage and marginalization in society, and it's harmful, and to keep that percolating and mulling it over in my mind as I go through the material and through the course, and recognizing that some students may have lived experience of it.

So that process, that self-reflective piece, starting sitting down, looking at a semester, looking at a course and its design, I think that's a good starting point. Then, certainly the knowledge that I have, the information I have, what have I learned. If I was coming back to a course, what worked last time? What didn't work? What have I learned since then that maybe would change up the course with new material? If I've been to a conference, a seminar, that kind of thing, and I've learned new things, changed stuff with that. Certainly new material coming up, new findings in the research, all of that, but also ...

And certainly it'll depend on the university or college and what resources are available, but finding out who to speak with, certainly for indigenous content. I mean, I was fortunate. We have an indigenous education developer I could go to. Trent Online directed me to him, and it was fantastic. But if the institution doesn't have that resource available, find somebody to speak with who's indigenous, like if the person who's developing the course is not indigenous, and get their feedback, their input and feedback. It's very iterative, for me anyway. Always open to new learning.

Speaker 1:

Thank you very much for your time today and sharing your experiences in decolonizing your course or spending some time figuring out how you can incorporate indigenous worldviews and knowledge into your course. Good luck when it runs for the first time. I hope it goes well.

Dr. Ehret: Thank you. It's been my pleasure.