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“It Feels Fake:” Decolonizing Curriculum and Pedagogy in Predominantly White Institutions

Hollie Anderson Kulago, Paul J. Guernsey, and Wayne Wapeemukwa

Many Indigenous and Indigenous-allied scholars recognize the importance of building and maintaining relationships with Indigenous peoples, families, and communities in their educational environs. We are scholars who, at the time of this study, lived and worked in Pennsylvania, where there are no Indigenous nations with federal or state recognized status. This is the case even though Indigenous peoples, including Haudenosaunee and Lenape, live on their original territories, and there are many other Indigenous peoples in public schools, on university campuses, and in community spaces, such as American Indian centers. In places where Indigenous nations hold state or federal recognition, partnerships with educational institutions have become routes that Indigenous nations use to advocate for their students, goals, and knowledges. Without that status, Indigenous peoples, families, communities, educators, and allies seek alternative routes.

There are few Indigenous communities near our campuses of Pennsylvania State University and Lafayette College (Easton, Pennsylvania). As Paul Guernsey describes in detail below, this is no accident. We acknowledge the colonial histories (and ongoing realities) of removal, dispossession, and genocide that led to this erasure. Many of the Indigenous peoples on whose lands the universities are situated thrive elsewhere as nations or within smaller pockets of community on traditional homelands. This context leads us to ask: How do we build relationships to this land if the political continuations or tribal nations of the Indigenous peoples of the area are not easily accessible here?

Our initial attempt to deliver Indigenous and decolonizing curricula in a Pennsylvania-based land-grant university and a private liberal arts college resulted in a general feeling of “fakeness.” No matter how hard we tried, remaining accountable to Indigenous peoples seemed an impossible task given the larger, institutional structures and historical contexts that we operated in. We had a new task: *How can we deliver Indigenous and decolonizing curricula without it “feeling fake?”* We believe that this question resonates with the questions posed by this special issue, including: *“How do communal needs and theories of social change shape pedagogical approaches? How do sovereignty, decolonization, resurgence, and/or Indigenous well-being approaches manifest different pedagogical approaches?”* Our article provides one way of answering these important questions. By sharing our conversations, experiences, and stories, we invite you, the reader, into a relationship with us as you consider your own journey with Indigenous and decolonizing pedagogy. Together, we will come to a deeper understanding of decolonizing curricula.

INDIGENOUS EPISTEMOLOGIES AND DECOLONIZING PEDAGOGY

The theoretical framework for this paper engages Indigenous epistemologies and decolonizing pedagogy. Broadly speaking, Indigenous epistemologies emphasize wholeness (physical, emotional, spiritual, and intellectual), interconnectedness to land (in all its forms and entities), and relationship with others (family, communities, and nations). Knowledge, in this holistic framework, tends to be both subjectively determined *and* collectively accountable (Kulago, et al., 2021). Indigenous scholars see knowledge as fundamentally relational and community as the primary setting for Indigenous education (Wilson, 2008; Cajate, 2015). In a sentence: “Indigenous education is rooted in wholeness and survival of the individual and community” (Kulago & Jaime, 2022, p. 9). This might be referred to as what Kovach (cited in Windchief & San Pedro, 2019) calls “self-in-relation,” because it “frames knowledge as a co-production located in the development of ourselves in relation to others” (p. xvii).

As we worked to decolonize our praxis, we grounded ourselves in Indigenous ways of knowing and decolonizing insights to realize the value of relational and collective thinking in our curriculum and pedagogy. Because we felt accountable to Indigenous students, families, communities, knowledges, and sovereignties, our stories focused on the ways that western educational institutions, simply by being who they were, worked against these goals and towards the erasure of Indigenous presence. Western schooling has been an essential conduit of settler-colonialism, a conduit that continues to support the dispossession of Indigenous peoples from their/our lands with “civilizing agendas” that replace communality with individuality. This overwriting of relationships “enable[s] a deconstruction of collective understandings that informed and maintained tribal resistance to land confiscations” (Pihama & Lee-Morgan, 2019, p. 2). In sum, settler colonialism corrodes Indigenous knowledge systems by disrupting relationships to land, resulting in “a profound epistemic, ontological, cosmological violence” (Tuck & Yang, 2012, p. 5). Collectivity is key to disrupting goals of western educational institutions.

Our task, as Indigenous and Indigenous-allied educators, is to re-establish the connections and relationships that western schooling has historically severed. As we see it, “the purpose of decolonial curricula is to rupture the epistemic barriers of western hegemonic knowledge” (Todd & Roberts, 2018, p. 69) and re-establish connections with the Indigenous communities to the lands where we work and with the lands *themselves*. The land cannot be a mere venue or space upon which we live and work; it must also be involved in the education process as an actor and subject (not an object) in decolonization. We see value in protecting room for “epistemological collisions” (Kerr, 2014, p. 92) between western and decolonizing pedagogical frameworks. Such collisions “occur in Western educational institutions when the mechanistic assumptions of modernist ontologies are challenged by Indigenous perspectives based in contrasting ontologies” (Kerr, 2014, p. 92). These collisions then become sites for critical pedagogy. We believe that such curricula must do more than merely educate; they must also repair the Cartesian split at the very foundation of western “rationality.” Such healing informs the way we come to know and do education in our various worlds and, we claim, can only take place if pedagogues adopt an alternative epistemology.

Our article branches into three sections or “stories”—one for each author—to illustrate three different experiences that all deliver Indigenous and decolonizing curriculum. Colonialism creates distance and disconnection at different scales. Each story highlights how the authors struggled to find healing at different levels of community, land, and self. The first story speaks to the challenge educators face when remaining accountable to Indigenous peoples. The second speaks to institutional blockages that western educational institutions erect between non-Indigenous allies and diasporic Indigenous communities. The third speaks to how western schooling alienates Indigenous educators from their ancestors and how this “ancestral alienation” affects curriculum delivery.

We have organized our findings according to what Stó:lō scholar Jo-Ann Archibald (2008) calls “storywork,” to bring you into relationship with us. We engaged in storywork because it “educates and heals the heart, mind, body, and spirit, weaving new synergies of transformational change through deep interrelational understandings of story, people, and place” (Archibald, Lee-Morgan, & De Santolo, 2019, p. 8). Storywork, moreover, provided us the space to continuously reconnect with each other and stay aligned with our goals to support Indigenous students, families, communities, and ways of being.

We began practicing storywork at the conclusion of our first writing project. We met once a month to share stories with each other and to work through the challenges that we faced while attempting to remain true to our decolonizing pedagogy. Through our sharing, we also grounded ourselves in our decolonizing curriculum and pedagogy. We took heed of Archibald’s (2008) principles of respect, responsibility, and reverence as living, breathing values that allowed us to critique ourselves and one

another. This relaxed and open atmosphere, however, did not mean that we let each other “off the hook.” Rather, it challenged us in new ways that we were not used to, especially given our experience in western schools. Based on our various positionalities, we looked at each other’s experiences with different lenses in a receptive, robust, and holistic learning context. Through relational dialogue, we found that our efforts to deliver decolonizing curricula were frustrated by many shared structural conditions of western institutions, including 1) the uncertainty and geographical randomness of labor markets that creates social isolation and distances Indigenous educators from their homelands, 2) tenure and merit-based pay systems that do not acknowledge the emotional labor or community-building inherent to Indigenous epistemologies, 3) grant funding criteria that center educational institutional needs over Indigenous nations, and 4) a labor ethic of competition and overachievement that demands self-exploitation and pushing oneself to the point of exhaustion, burnout, and physical/mental illness. We found that storywork, far from being purely subjective, myopic, or relativistic, is an Indigenous form of structural critique—a point we return to in the conclusion. After elaborating on each of our stories, we conclude with some concrete recommendations and takeaways that other, like-minded educators may implement in their praxis.

SHARING STORIES AND INFORMING OUR PRACTICE

Engaging Relationships and Being Responsible

I am Hollie Anderson Kulago, a Diné woman working in a predominantly White institution 2,000 miles away from my homeland. My work is dedicated to and driven by supporting Indigenous students, families, self-determination, and sovereignty. I created a decolonizing and Indigenous curriculum and pedagogies course that focused on creating curriculum and theorizing instruction through critical Indigenous pedagogy frameworks that include truthful histories, centering Indigenous knowledges, and supporting Indigenous futurity, nation-building, and sovereignty. However, as I considered what it meant to teach these “topics,” I felt that there needed to be more action in the way of relationship-building with the land and the Indigenous community. Like almost all others at this educational institution, I am a visitor to these lands. To me, creating and teaching this class without local Indigenous input felt fake. There are very few Indigenous communities in central Pennsylvania, so as I contemplated my work, I wondered how to make what I teach real. Throughout my years in the region, I have established relationships with various Indigenous students, families, and communities outside of Pennsylvania, so I began to engage these relationships in ways that could not only help my curricula but also support Indigenous communities’ goals for their students. State borders should not determine the original territories of these nations.

To form these relationships, I organized time to work with people from Haudenosaunee communities to discuss our parallel needs for curricula that would support the educational goals for their youth and for my course. I traveled to meet with community educators, teachers, and leaders on their lands to discuss the work we do and how it could help support their youth. During my time with the Haudenosaunee group, I heard stories from their ways of knowing that brought context to the goals for my course. I heard stories that attached my current location to significant places within their creation stories. They shared their ideas of how western educational institutions could support their educational needs. These beneficial discussions started a flurry of events that ultimately led to me organizing visits and introducing a delegation of Haudenosaunee representatives to representatives of my educational institution. A more formal relationship between the institution and Haudenosaunee community has been initiated.

Once these relationships were engaged, I felt an overwhelming sense of responsibility to honor them. On the one hand, it might seem as though I had created more work for myself. My new collaborators now had expectations of me to be an organizer, liaison, and a direct influential line to how the

educational institution makes moves to support the needs of the Haudenosaunee, Indigenous peoples, and humanity in general. However, feeling this overwhelming sense of responsibility took what I was teaching in my course to a level that did not feel fake; it could not be faked. It got real all of a sudden! It asked different actions of me, different from merely sitting in my office, writing a syllabus referencing Indigenous and critical scholars in a weekly schedule linked to assignments that could be graded. The sense of responsibility asked me to act. Along with the overwhelming sense of accountability to the Haudenosaunee community, I experienced an overwhelming and reciprocal sense of support from them. As the only Indigenous faculty member in my college, I have felt isolated, even though I have extraordinarily supportive colleagues. The support that comes from the Indigenous community feels different and reminds me of the care I need as an Indigenous person to be in a community and reminds me of why I do this work. The requirements of western institutions sometimes take me in different directions. The next time I teach my course, it will reflect my responsibility to and support from the Haudenosaunee delegation and their communities.

Staying Accountable to Indigenous Nations in Academic Contexts

My name is Paul Guernsey. I am a settler, Euro-American, and I grew up on Ohlone lands in what is called California by some. In the fall of 2021, I began as a Visiting Assistant Professor of Environmental Studies at an elite liberal arts college located in Lenapehoking, the traditional homelands of the Lenni Lenape. These lands were stolen in 1737 by the sons of William Penn by way of the “Walking Purchase.” Even Pennsylvania courts have recognized that this “purchase” was a blatant fraud. In a 2004 court case in which Lenape people sought to reacquire a portion of their homeland, the US District Court for Eastern Pennsylvania found that the legal basis of settler title was not the transaction but the doctrine of discovery, according to which, “Aboriginal title could be extinguished by the sovereign at will” (Delaware Nation v. Commonwealth of Pennsylvania, 2004). It is therefore not any purchase, agreement, or mutual understanding that secures this land for settlers, but the principles of white supremacy enshrined in US law that assume that the “superior genius of Europe” grants the right to extinguishment (*Johnson & Graham’s Lessee v. M’Intosh, 1823*).

It was on this land and in this context that a student approached me in the fall of 2021 asking questions about the college’s Climate Action Plan, or CAP. The CAP proposed to reforest a 100-acre field that was currently under monocrop corn production as a way for the college to offset its carbon emissions. The student asked what good it would do to replant trees on stolen Indigenous lands just so that the college could call itself carbon-neutral. We agreed, it felt fake. The default parameters of western environmental education placed a premium on land as a resource for “sustainable” development, perpetuating the attack on Indigenous collectivity and continuance. So, we asked ourselves: How could our work become accountable to Indigenous students, homelands, and nations in its plans for sustainability and carbon neutrality?

In the spring of 2022, I ran a course titled “Decolonizing Methodologies for Environmental Studies.” We began by engaging with the histories, treaties, and acts of dispossession that eliminated Indigenous presence on the land, and we discussed what sorts of actions we could take to honor Indigenous homelands and nations. Our first thought was that as a settler institution, we should not unilaterally create a land acknowledgment that was not conceived in collaboration with Lenape peoples and backed up by substantial institutional changes (Stewart-Ambo & Yang, 2021). Likewise, we could not engage in “place-based” education to get to know the land without building relationships with Lenape nations (Calderon, 2014; Kulago et al., 2021). With the closest political continuations of the Lenni Lenape in Oklahoma, some 1,500 miles away, our work was cut out for us. Indeed, the wounds and rifts created by colonialism are spiritual, cultural, political, and geographical in nature. Healing them is no easy task.

To support our efforts, I applied for a teaching grant to form a collaboration with the restoration ecology

class that was working on the reforestation plans. I wrote activities into the grant that I thought would appeal to the college, such as field trips and a Lenape scholar guest speaker. Much to my satisfaction, the grant was enthusiastically approved. However, almost by divine intervention, my little ego boost was quickly put in check the very next day. I had been asked by the Indigenous peoples Student Association at Penn State to organize a panel during Native American Heritage Month on allyship with Indigenous people. We were sharing stories about successes and failures. Hollie Kulago was talking about how she was working to “support the work that Indigenous nations are already doing” in her collaboration with folks at the Mohawk Nation in Akwesasne. Somewhere in me, a switch flipped, and I said to myself, “You wrote the grant backwards. You centered the needs, traditions, and interests of the college rather than supporting the work that Lenape people are already doing.” With yet another “it feels fake” moment, I realized how important it was to talk through our work in community and remind each other of basic principles so that we do not become “disconnected” from what we have learned and unlearned (Archibald, 2008). I realized that the incessant tendency of western institutions to recenter themselves in our teaching and research can only be resisted when we share our work and stories with others and hold each other accountable.

My misformulation of the grant revealed a deeper struggle with how to prioritize Indigenous sovereignty in educational institutions. In particular, the fact that I applied for the grant in isolation, rather than in community, was symptomatic of the values of expediency and professional advancement in academia, which tend to encourage individual actions rather than communal ones. Building and maintaining reparative relationships with ourselves, our students, and Indigenous nations often demands working in spite of, rather than in and through, the colonial institutions we serve.

It was not until after the grant was approved that I got in touch with people working for the Delaware Nation in Anadarko, Oklahoma. We developed fruitful synergies and brainstormed ways we might support work the nation was already doing. We talked about summer programs to bring youth back to the homeland and giving back land in the restoration area for ceremony. Some of our ideas ran counter to the material interests of the college to maintain control over the land. As part of our coursework that semester, environmental studies students produced a 100-page document that outlines why and how the college should take actions to honor the first nations of the land it occupies. A presentation given by students demanding that the college attend to its responsibilities was poorly attended by administrators, and the college’s proposals to develop the land continue to ignore obligations to Lenape people. I left my position after a year, but the dedication of my colleagues and students to these issues remains. Overall, I learned that my failures in the praxis of allyship were due to failures in building relationships. Building relationships enhances our collective power and our influence over the structural conditions in which we teach. Can decolonizing pedagogies that heal self, land, and community begin any other way?

Healing Ancestral Alienation with the Truth

Let me begin with the truth: I am Wayne Wapeemukwa, an Indigenous (Métis) graduate student who struggles with alcoholism. I grew up on the west coast of Canada, away from my Indigenous homeland. As a child, I witnessed my father look down on my mother’s Métis heritage, and indeed, I adopted some of those very racist beliefs myself. This trauma was collaterally triggered by the rigorous exigencies of graduate school, where I began to rely on alcohol as a way to make up for my lack of connection, relationship, and family. Worse, the COVID-19 pandemic forced my school to migrate online. While this solitude initially benefited my productivity, it also imposed new challenges because I was literally cut off from peers and kin. I continued to push myself to meet the expectations of my doctoral program, and it was in this context that I turned to alcohol. I began to process this truth in monthly meetings with my co-authors, where we discussed the broader historical context of my disease to decolonization. I share that historical context here.

My great-great-great grandfather, Fred Schindler, left his home of Kent, England to enlist with the North West Mounted Police at Fort Qu'Appelle, Saskatchewan in 1878. Although he was sent deep into the Northwest, far from his home, Fred did not outrun his penchant for alcohol. As a Mountie, Fred took bribes by selling patrol schedules to bootleggers. After this was revealed, he fled his post but was soon captured and sentenced to 12 months' imprisonment with hard labor in Fort Calgary. Remarkably, Fred escaped and fled south to the United States, where British authorities could not follow. Deep in the Turtle Mountains, in what is known today as North Dakota, Fred met my great-great-great grandmother, Elise Lenoir, a Métis originally from the historic settlement of St. François Xavier. In the Turtle Mountains, Fred and Elise co-founded a saloon and horse and cattle ranch. In 1889, Fred became a Deputy US Marshal. Over the next 12 years, he used his government and settler privileges to bootleg and Elise used her Indigenous kinship networks throughout the Red River and Turtle Mountains to find buyers. But, in 1902, the tap finally ran dry when Fred was charged with defrauding the government. On November 21, 1902, the *Bismarck Daily Tribune* revealed that, on the night before his trial, Fred celebrated what was likely to be his last night of freedom at the Hotel Metropole. The newspaper noted that, sometime between midnight and four in the morning, Fred attempted to escape but was too drunk and got caught. He was subsequently sent to the State Penitentiary in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, where he died two years later with Elise by his side.

Reflecting on Fred Schindler's story makes me sad and happy at the same time. On the one hand, the absurdity of his repeated infractions and proclivity for defrauding the police make me laugh. On the other, his history of alcoholism, abuse, self-harm, and abandonment strikes a deeper, more personal chord. While Fred and Elise demonstrate a resilience and resistance that runs through my entire Métis family, they evidence an equally tenacious relationship with alcohol. This story pushes me to question why alcohol has had such a powerful impact on my family. My sobriety provides me with a relatively simple answer: loneliness. In a word, the legacy that settler-colonial dispossession directly imprints upon me is the feeling of being alone in spite of my deep family history on our homeland. I realized that community was the only panacea for my alcoholic and ancestral alienation.

In 2019, I returned to the West coast, where I began making trips into the Métis homeland, retracing the steps of my ancestors and reconnecting with kin. Returning "home" made me realize how deeply I was alienated from my own ancestors and how I was using substances to make up for this "ancestral alienation." In a flurry of words and anxieties, I expressed this to my family and Elders. I remember being taken aback by the care and patience that my elder, Aline LaFlamme, provided: "Let me wrap my blanket around you," she said. With kind words, open ears, and soft hearts, my aunties and loved ones provided me the space and knowledge to reconnect. I was advised to expand my circle and reach out to my relations so that I could find a mast to lash myself to and escape the vortex of alcoholism. Returning home was essential to my decolonization because it allowed me to see first-hand how the decisions my ancestors made ultimately led to my survival, and I learned that my affliction was not mine alone to bear.

I tell you this because I believe that it is important for teachers to teach truthful socio-cultural and political histories that inform the contemporary and personal contexts of their students, families, and communities. The truth can be harsh but it can also be helpful. Telling the truth to students helps them to critically analyze, resist, and heal harmful narratives about themselves and their people. Telling truths about *yourself* can be a hard and painful process, no doubt, but it can also reveal deeper logics about settler colonialism. Indeed, an essential part of my own personal decolonization was admitting the truth to myself that I was an alcoholic, and that my alcoholism could ultimately be traced to dispossession. I could only realize this truth after returning home and critically analyzing my ancestral alienation. The critical analysis of my family's history was not the whole story, however. That truth

led me to understand how settler colonialism works to separate me from my Indigenous background, family, and lands. When I reconnected with my family, I learned that my relationship with alcohol was a part of a longer history ultimately grounded in dispossession. Understanding that context pushed me to identify the effects of settler colonialism within me, specifically, the isolation from my family and homelands, and the toxic coping mechanism of alcohol abuse.

As an educator, I share my story with my students at the beginning of my course. I make myself vulnerable by telling this story so that students can feel comfortable to engage in similar community-building practices. I talk about my upbringing as a Métis person who grew up away from my homeland; how this removal fed into my alcoholism; and most importantly, how I ultimately overcame that affliction by reconnecting with my family and community. By telling the truth about my journey, I demonstrate the power of a relational approach to education. As a sober Indigenous educator, I seek to empower students to reconnect with themselves, their ancestors, and a world which they can re-imagine by healing “ancestral alienation.”

DISCUSSION AND PRACTICAL RECOMMENDATIONS IN FULL CIRCLE

This paper highlights the importance of building relationships with Indigenous communities and families and connecting to the land when creating decolonizing curriculum for Western educational institutions. Our stories demonstrate how Western education imposes institutional measures that disconnect the mind, body, and spirit from the lands and people that bring them together. Wayne shared how his personal decolonizing processes led to his renewed commitment to education as an ameliorative and decolonizing praxis: Education must repair. Paul shared the way his attention to including Indigenous perspectives opened the door to rethinking and reformulating campus sustainability projects and uses of grant funding. Hollie shared how her feelings of discontent with her course pushed her to engage pre-existing relationships with Indigenous communities, and how it led to important relationship-building between these communities and the university.

These conclusions may seem like common knowledge to some. However, when we get into the everydayness of the demands on educators, it is too easy to teach and function within a western institution that privileges and rewards inauthentic relationships to place and to each other. Such structures incentivize and perpetuate objectivity and individualism, furthering disconnection from lands. To implement our Indigenous and decolonizing pedagogy under such structural conditions was challenging. None of us were strong enough to walk this path alone. We needed each other. We hope that our stories engage readers and spark new ideas for them to stay connected to their whole selves, Indigenous communities and families, and lands.

The following are recommendations for practices that helped us to reconnect the mind, body, and spirit as teachers and learners in western institutions. We write these with the understanding that all educational institutions on Turtle Island are built upon Indigenous lands and all levels of education are implicated in settler colonialism. We hope that Indigenous students, families, communities, and nations thrive in the areas where you live and work. Decolonizing curricula and pedagogy cannot exist without these relationships. Valuing and building relationships should become the first work that we do to create and implement decolonizing curricula. It might not be easy, but it is necessary. These questions can help guide your own inquiry for working towards Indigenous and decolonizing curricula and pedagogy: Who are the Indigenous peoples of the area? With whom should we build relationships? What are the histories between my western educational institution and the people? How can I be intentional about supporting Indigenous goals/sovereignty? The recommendations for practice are to:

- Build relationships with Indigenous students, families, groups on campus, surrounding communities, and nations.

- Be knowledgeable about the relationships educational institutions have with Indigenous nations in order to formulate your goals. These relationships may be tenuous and fraught by historical traumas, so you might have to work with Indigenous students, families, groups, communities, and/or nations to create new and restorative relationships.
- Align the goals and duties of your job description or vision statements with the work you want to do with Indigenous communities or those who support Indigenous students and/or sovereignty.
- Create curriculum in ways that make space within learning objectives, assignments, and instructional strategies for relationship-building between students and Indigenous organizations, communities, and lands.
- Identify colleagues with whom you can have conversations and share stories and who can help keep you accountable to your goals for creating and implementing decolonizing curricula.

It is not enough to bring diverse educators and students into the same exclusive spaces; deeper structural changes to education are necessary. As co-authors and friends, we continue to meet, discuss, and support each other as we work to decolonize our practice and selves as educators. We invite others to join us in this shared process of creating knowledge and uplifting Indigenous sovereignty.

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Wayne Wapeemukwa is a doctoral candidate in philosophy at Penn State University. His research reanimates dialogue between Marxism and Indigenous political theories as they engage questions of land, race, capital, and history. He specializes in 19th and 20th century Marxism, its uptake among Indigenous activists, as well as Indigenous feminist approaches to decolonization. He is a citizen of the Métis Nation of British Columbia and member of the Chartered Métis Community of Waceya.