

The Current State Is a Crime: Decolonizing Experiential Education on the Brock University Campus

This Participatory Action Research (PAR) project at Brock University was designed and executed in full collaboration with Indigenous educators at Brock University and looks at Brock University, a campus with a focus on decolonization as well as experiential learning, through an Appreciative Inquiry framework to best determine how experiential education (EE) can be decolonized. Given that experiential learning is pan-campus, elements of the findings are related to decolonizing the university alongside the experiential education that takes place as part of the campus' goals.

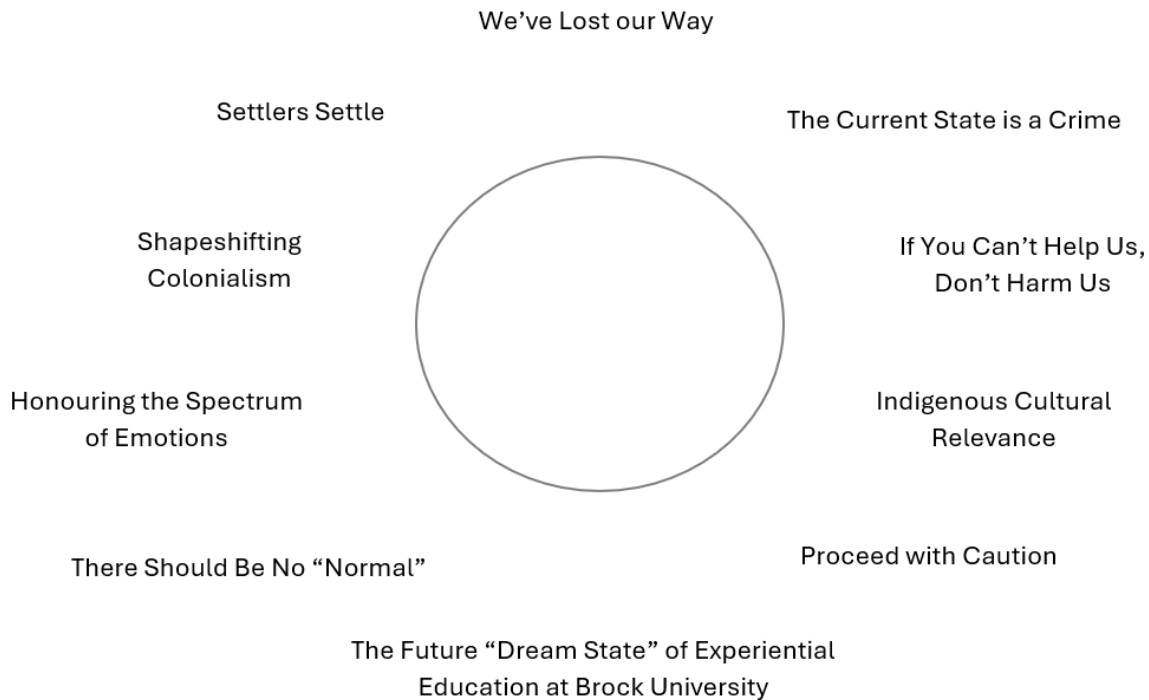


Figure 1. Research themes co-created with Collaborators.

To visit the thesis document directly follow this link:

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For further questions and/or discussion: Sandy Howe – sandy@lappanohowe.com

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The land upon which I live, work, play, learn and research, as well as the land upon which the campus this study is focused on sits, is the traditional territory of the Haudenosaunee and Anishinaabe peoples and it is because of their ownership, stewardship, friendship, and partnership that I am able to thrive in my life here today. I would also like to acknowledge the Attawandaron, Mississaugas of the Credit, and many other Indigenous peoples who have had a role in the formation of my current privileged life. I wish we all might spend time every single day thinking about the connection of our feet on these grounds and reflecting on the words of a Collaborator who said, "my ancestor's footprints are still beneath these buildings (at Brock University)".

In addition to these lands, this study took place and is focused on the area covered by the Dish with One Spoon Wampum agreement and the Two Row Treaties, which are critical to the outcomes, as is a focus on land back. Given the topic of this research, it is also critical that we acknowledge that most of both experiential and land-based learning facilitated across Brock University by its faculty and staff, as well as universities across this country, takes place on unceded territory.

The themes can be summarized briefly in the following ways:

- ★ **We've Lost Our Way:** The War of 1812 was fought and won with leadership from both Sir Maj. Gen. Isaac Brock (strategic thinker, strong leader) as well as Chief Tecumseh (experiential learner and experience taking down a Fort). We acknowledge Brock strongly and as namesake, but lack acknowledgement of Tecumseh prominently enough and portrayed respectfully when he is acknowledged, as well as Indigenous teachings and the experiential learning strength that stemmed from Brock University's history. We need Brock *and* Tecumseh.
- ★ **The Current State is a Crime:** Credit needs to be given to Indigenous peoples for experiential learning and "to ignore the connection between experiential education and Indigenous culture is a crime", "leaving an Indigenous lens and acknowledgement out of EE is irresponsible", and not acknowledging the Indigenous roots of EE is like the cycle of abuse."
- ★ **Shapeshifting Colonialism:** Colonialism never leaves or goes away, it just changes forms (from Columbus enslaving people to residential schools to the '60s scoop, to whomever is next). Is education poised to be the next "white saviours"? Parallels and learning here around how to safely offer experiential learning opportunities without being white saviours in community, as well as to do no further harm as we move forward with decolonization of the institution and experiential learning.
- ★ **Settlers Settle:** Tuck & Yang (2012) offer a variety of settler moves to innocence that can assist with alleviating settler guilt. Strategic plans, for example, outline future directions but can over-promise and under-deliver when actions that follow do not match the words written. Are we ready for a decolonization that "shakes the foundation" or will we continue to display words and plans that make us attractive and accepting of all histories/experiences? Are we innocently "ticking the box" by offering land acknowledgements and alleviating guilt by finding areas to pat ourselves on the back?
- ★ **If You Can't Help Us, Don't Harm Us:** In the spirit of the Two Row Wampum, if settlers are not able to help Indigenous peoples and move decolonization goals (campus and EE/EL) forward in a good way, then at minimum, do no further harm. Appropriation of EE/EL hurts, as does offering land acknowledgements and mispronouncing the words, as examples of continued harm on a basic level. If we are all treaty people, then learning to honour the treaties is an important step for everyone.
- ★ **There Should be No "Normal":** Marginalization is a consequence of colonization and "normal" is a Euro-centric term that can be used to justify not bringing about change. Part of decolonizing is shedding "normal" in place of a true "nothing about us without us" future state related to Indigenous perspectives. When we hold these alongside settler perspectives, we are able to strengthen two-eyed seeing by creating a stronger worldview based on the two combined (Marshall et al., 2012).
- ★ **Honouring the Spectrum of Emotions:** this research was highly emotional, from the stories the Collaborators brought forward about Indigenous peoples "living loss" each day they are on campus based on the history of Canada's education system and intergenerational trauma existing, in part, as a result, to the joy, passion and hope expressed related to the potential that exists with decolonizing experiential education and our campus as a whole. Taking good care of those around us is important.
- ★ **Indigenous Cultural Relevance:** the values of the University are not in alignment with Indigenous values, and when these are not aligned, friction can result. Indigenous culture is based on putting the needs of the community and the needs of the whole, first. Relationships, taking care of each other, working together to solve problems and forgoing individual recognition are prioritized. There is alignment between Indigenous and EE/EL values however, because of EL's Indigenous roots.
- ★ **Proceed with Caution:** While there is ample opportunity to decolonize EE/EL and University should feel encouraged to try and continue the work started, it is important to do so carefully. For example, we cannot expect Indigenous peoples to work outside the scope of their jobs, or to do the "heavy lifting" for us. Each person on campus can work to decolonize their own mind first, and then apply their learning to their work. Being aware of appropriation, harms taking place, the need for land back, Tecumseh ultimately helping to win the war but lose his Indigenous status as many Indigenous students did while universities were places for assimilation, etc. are all cautions to keep in mind.
- ★ **The Future "Dream State" of Experiential Education at Brock University:** Build on the community-based approach and values of experiential learning that align with Indigenous values.

Future “Dream State” of Experiential Education in Detail

The ideas and contributions to the future dream state of Brock University from a decolonization standpoint, including experiential education, have been compiled and separated into themes based on who can activate them, or what area of the institution they apply to. Many of these items are specific to **WHAT** we can do and productive steps forward. **HOW** we do it shall follow.



Decolonizing Brock University overall:

- Consider land back at all times: the relationship with the land (individually and as a campus, how we treat it and make decisions about it, who has space and what proportion including space for Indigenous student/campus support and education).
- Recreate Brock’s identity: think back to who contributed to and how we were founded
- Accountability around decolonization (e.g. being clear starting with the strategic plan)
- 70 of 94 Calls to Action are education-based; start somewhere. Remember: Don’t be afraid to try to decolonize – it is an iterative process that is non-linear.
- Holistic development and approaches embedded on campus e.g. medicine wheel.
- Work with Indigenous community partners i.e. Native centres, Six Nations Polytechnic, etc.
- Review policies to ensure Indigenous perspectives are honoured (i.e. smudging policy is helpful, but inappropriate/depressing to ask permission in advance to heal from trauma).
- Work to decolonize time when possible (allow time needed to do things in a good way).
- Loosen communication expectations (how quickly e-mails need to be returned and/or provide administrative assistance in the form of two-eyed seeing strengths).
- Let Brock be a destination for both campus and external community learning about Indigeneity and Canadian history.
- Increase visual Indigenous presence, via art, etc.
- Gently educate and offer ceremony:
 - Thanksgiving address could be given at the start of term, i.e. Opening of Term Barbeque
 - Sunrise ceremony, sacred fire, drum circles, use the longhouse, moon ceremony, mid-winter feast, talks about different medicines (monthly/quarterly).
- More work such as Decolonization Symposium in Pond Inlet (October 28, 2022).
- Aim to make land acknowledgements automatically thought of. How is this a stepping stone to reconciliation work for you? Is it being personalized or made meaningful in some way?

Decolonization priorities for senior administration, governance and/or from a human resources standpoint:

- Ask: How serious are we about doing this?
- Make VP, Indigenous Engagement the President’s “Auntie”.
- The role of President has been a revolving door, which is not helping. Long-term relationships with community and stability in leadership is needed. Create a plan and environment that supports multiple terms of service.
- “Show me your budget; I’ll show you your priorities”: ensure budget aligns with goals.
- Create Board of Trustees and Senate discomfort when needed.
- More Indigenous people employed and equipped to do this work.
- Have a permanent, tenured Indigenous person in each Faculty, then in each Department (“tenure allows people to speak truth”, traditional Indigenous knowledge as qualification).
- Decolonize job descriptions to account for the time Indigenous peoples spend going above and beyond or operating as cultural resources to/for the campus.
- Training offered:
 - Indigenous cultural competencies for all employees at Brock
 - OCAP training module for all new employees (similar to the WHMIS requirement).





Decolonizing experiential education:

- Aim for day you can't talk about Brock EE without talking about Indigenous roots:
 - Cite Indigenous roots and history before any Western sources.
 - Use the experiential learning acknowledgement and tell/teach students "why".
- Review the experiential education definition and list of categories given the thorough feedback provided by the collaborators. Ensure land-based learning is included.
- Consider land-based learning and offer land-based workshops.
- Review organizational structures and titles related to experiential education. "Dream Team" would also include an Indigenous EE team added to support this work.
- Embed Indigenous experiential learning in all programs (start where this is easiest e.g. Astronomy, Recreation and Leisure Studies, Nursing, etc.).
- Create a module focused on Indigeneity and EE to embed in each EE course.
- Give choice in evaluation with EL: don't have to stick to essays, True/False, fill in the blank.
- Build partnerships with community in good ways. Experiential Education Coordinators are great examples of how this is done well and values at the forefront.
- Build Indigenous partnerships that are not a one-time project, but an on-going relationship.
- Teach students about the dysfunction that can exist in Indigenous communities, as well as the concept of white saviours.

Decolonizing academic programs:

- Ask: What more can we do?
- Call(s) to Action assigned to each Faculty/Program and allow them to determine how they will activate them and embed in programs/courses for all students.
- Decolonization committee for each Department (with Indigenous representation ideally).
- Embed Indigenous context across all courses and programs (avoid cookie-cutter approach)
- Decolonize curriculum, the classroom and faculty development:
 - Embed Indigenous cultural competencies to curriculum and learning outcomes.
 - Help students determine how to use what they are learning in class to "make world a better place" (link theory to practice in meaningful ways, prepare students for their life outside the academy, relate course content to much bigger picture).
 - Teach students that they each have special gifts to offer, to be decent human beings, have acceptance of all, and hold relationality closely.
 - Go beyond intellectual focus and into the four aspects of self: mental, physical, emotional, and spiritual.
- Use great examples e.g. Major Games course with North American Indigenous Games.
- Consider a version of the Instructional Skills Workshop (ISW) that is focused on decolonizing experiential education, the classroom, and/or educators (*collaborator fully acknowledges that this is a colonized decolonization idea: meet the campus in ways that work*).



To decolonize the classroom:

- Consider Indigenous approaches to student engagement and pedagogy: "Unbolt the desks", "Break away from the cannon of lecture, reading and writing", use reflection as a phenomenal tool (instead of tests, quizzes, etc. where possible; and ask/clarify: "How does this content make your community or world a better place?"), use storytelling, journaling, flexible approaches (arts, projects).
- No pedagogical appropriation: course titles can "psych out" and "dupe" people if content doesn't align with what we say the courses are.
- Teach the campus how to engage in circle pedagogies, focus on true reciprocity and relationship, and removing power dynamics and hierarchy (even in the classroom).

The ideas and contributions to the future dream state of Brock University from a decolonization standpoint also include culturally appropriate ways in order to bring the actions and ideas above to fruition. **HOW** we can begin to do this includes some of the following ideas as a starting point:

- Spend time working to decolonize our minds and strengthening two-eyed seeing as settler individuals, and then bring this lens to your work.
- Aim to stay unsettled: take responsibility, try new things, ask tough questions, question norms, be uncomfortable, set “stretch goals” and move beyond status quo.
- Build new or strengthen relationships that support and advance this work.
- Reflect on the following, for example: what we would like to accomplish, how we want to make a difference, what we are willing to do to make this happen and how we can shift our approach, what might need to be taken into consideration to do so, are people willing to sacrifice to make it happen, and what does that look like?
- Consider the land in decision making, or what land back might look like.
- Ensure Indigenous voices at the table, and enough Indigenous peoples to do so (variety of Indigenous perspective) such that work is done in continuous consultation. Is this work embedded in job descriptions and/or are Indigenous peoples being appropriately compensated or recognized for their work? Remember: Nothing about us without us.
- Ensure appropriate supports are available: Indigenous peoples being on campus is resistance.
- Representation matters in all ways: Let Indigenous people teach faculty and/or teach Indigenous content directly.
- Get to a point where we do not have to have these conversations around what decolonization could look like because we are naturally doing it.
- Make the campus “two-way” and reciprocal.
- More truth and storytelling are needed.
- Be encouraged by Indigenous peoples to “push back” against colonial practices where possible and/or where harmful.
- Consider harms being done and how these might be stopped.
- Work with intention.
- Do not be afraid to make mistakes if intentions are good. Learn from mistakes and try again.