Chapter 2

Embracing the Pivot: Engaging Wahkohtowin in Building Anti-Racist Learning Communities

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Soon after the University of Alberta transitioned to remote instruction, an instructor came to the Centre for Teaching and Learning (CTL) seeking help handling racist posts on discussion forums. One of their students had posted a racist comment implying that “Asian people” were the cause of the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, other instructors have come forward with similar concerns. These instructors knew that ignoring such comments was not an option, but were unsure how to proceed.

The University of Alberta is located in the city of Edmonton, Alberta which Cree people call amiskwaciwâskahikan. As the largest city in the northern half of the province, Edmonton is home to approximately 970,000 people (City of Edmonton, 2019). Over 50,000 Edmontonians self-identified as Indigenous and 36% as a member of a visible minority (Statistics Canada, 2016). Within this context, the University of Alberta (2019) is the largest post-secondary institution in Alberta with over 40,000 students, including over 1,200 Indigenous students and 9,000 international students representing 156 countries; the majority of the student population consists of students from urban or rural Alberta (many of whom may come from settler backgrounds; we cannot know for sure, because Canadian universities do not collect race-based data). The University of Alberta (2020), like many universities across North America, has expressed its commitment to equity, diversity, and inclusivity to lessen the fractures caused by societal differences. Yet, such aims can be thwarted by the settler-colonial logic of elimination which contributes to racialized online discourse, which is why we (the authors)—as Indigenous and settler scholars—came together with the support of our university to help instructors address this issue (Quad, 2020): to examine why these types of comments might occur in online discussions during times of duress.

The Context of White Supremacist Ideology

Racially imbued language (DiAngelo, 2011) can take many forms in the classroom but is enhanced when students enter an environment of (relative) anonymity such as the online classroom (Eschmann, 2019; Gin, 2019). As a result of the perceived anonymity in online
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spaces, instructors may see an increase in racist comments in their courses. Students from the dominant society, in this case, white Canadians, are experiencing a palpable, potential threat to their lives for the first time. Thus, white Canadians showed not only an increase in their prejudice (Greenberg et al., 2001), but also an increase in their rage due to inaccurate (and racist) narratives about Canada; these effects are coupled with a lack of perspective.

Some white Canadians may feel that their lives are in danger because of the COVID-19 virus, while existential threats against Indigenous peoples have raged in Canada since European settlers arrived on Indigenous lands in 1492. Settler colonialism’s “logic of elimination” constitutes white possession over Indigenous bodies, lands, and resources and has led to the genocide and assimilation of Indigenous peoples (Moreton-Robinson, 2015; Wolfe, 2006). This “logic” entails the false assumption that white settlers are superior and they rage against Indigenous peoples and their rights to lands and resources. This rage is embodied through racist comments and beliefs that somehow Indigenous peoples are receiving something to which white settlers should also be entitled or that Canadian taxpayers support Indigenous peoples through their tax dollars, which is wholly inaccurate (Vowel, 2018). As one example, Chaudry (2015) showed that Twitter users in Edmonton and Calgary, Alberta’s two largest cities, had high instances of racist tweets directed at Indigenous people. As a second example, due to racism and hate speech directed at Indigenous people, the Canadian Broadcast Company (CBC) (2015) has shut down the comments section of their online news articles. These situations in Canada (and Alberta) enable racially-biased conversations which often silence Indigenous and racialized students (Clark, 2004; Thomas, 2001).

This rage is also extended to persons of color, who are excluded from the Albertan majority through aggressions such as being told to “go back to their country,” (Mosleh, 2020). Since the pivot in March 2020, racists berating others (Elsiufi & Butler, 2020; Slimm & Robinson, 2020) and a student-created racist group (Antoneshyn, 2020) have been reported in Edmonton. Hate groups attempt to shut down anti-racist events in Alberta (Mosleh, 2020; Omstead, 2020) and Alberta has been identified as one of two provinces with a higher-than-average proportion of people who do not recognize systemic racism as a problem in their context (Parsons, 2020). It should be noted that this opinion is the majority in Alberta but not the majority in Edmonton, though “there is a significant segment of people in Edmonton who [do represent this belief.]” (Parsons, 2020). It should be recognized that racism in Alberta is not a recent problem; in 2019, Bashir Mohamed (2020) released an archive dedicated to detailing Alberta’s racist past (Braat, 2019). Building on this work, Mohamed (2020) has highlighted that systemic racism is woven into Edmonton’s history.

Edmontonians, and students at the University of Alberta by proxy, are no strangers to racism in their city, in-person and online. Since universities are a microcosm of what is happening in society at large, it should be recognized that systemic racism is woven into the history of the University of Alberta. As one example before the pivot, xenophobic posters recruiting students to a racist organization were posted across campus (Mertz, 2016). As another example, instructors were raising concerns about racist sentiments being expressed in their courses. The University, as an institution, stands against racism (as stated by Turpin, 2020) but its student body is made up of individuals, some of whom share overtly (or covertly) racist opinions.

With the perceived anonymity of online learning, instructors at the University of Alberta raised questions about helping students navigate potentially fractured learning spaces. As a result of the racist comment in an instructor’s discussion forums, our team provided instructors with a variety of communications to prepare for teaching in the pivot. We started with a podcast,
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Addressing Racism in the Classroom (Ward et al., 2020), which hundreds downloaded in the first months of the pandemic. This spurred a webinar conversation of the same title, which registered 275 instructors. Yet, these conversations brought forth more questions including;

- I have had a couple of students complain that forums are rooted in a colonial mindset. Can I use them?
- How do we create an inclusive environment and incorporate diversity into our case studies without reinforcing stereotypes?
- I don’t typically see racism in my class because I teach pretty objective content. Will it really be that different online?

At least these instructors were thinking about the systemic racism inherent in traditional education.

When interacting online students might feel permitted to act in a way that is not typically considered socially acceptable (Gin, 2019). As a result, instructors were concerned about how they might handle comments that perpetuate structural violence; e.g., a racist statement in an online forum. Our response to such questions is twofold. First, it is important for instructors to anticipate the potential problem and develop language to discuss this with learners before such occurrences can unfold (as well as during the troubling moment). Second, instructors need to consider how they might establish their classroom community online to avoid a fractured space.

Anticipating Defensive Reactions

We know from terror management theory (TMT) (Pyszczynski et al., 2015) that reminders of death affect our behaviour in both logical and illogical ways, including increased intolerance (e.g., Greenberg et al., 2001; Hayes et al, 2008). It makes sense that instructors have witnessed racist comments in their online classes during the COVID-19 pandemic. Being in a situation where we are constantly reminded of our bodies’ vulnerability to disease and death can take a toll on our personal and collective well-being because of our constant state of mortality salience (i.e., the state of having death on our minds) (Burke et al., 2010).

Humans tend to become more rigid and militant in our worldviews when reminded of death (Greenberg et al., 2001; Schimel et al., 2007). This situation occurs because worldviews and worldview groups give us a sense of permanence (i.e., security in an insecure world). When we encounter a different worldview, we can be put in a state of worldview threat, which has all kinds of effects (Solomon et al., 2015), including denial (e.g., an instructor thinking that a racist comment could not happen in their class) and insulting those who are exhibiting different beliefs or behavior from us (e.g., ad hominem attacks posted in a forum). Some defenses are more subtle, such as appropriating an aspect of an opposing view and incorporating it into your own; e.g., using a term for racial justice like “BIPoC” but then claiming to “not see race” (which we know from countless scholars to be misguided) (e.g., Kendi, 2019) and refusing to acknowledge that tension. Our defenses can even go unnoticed, such as decreased reading comprehension of worldview-threatening material (Williams et al., 2012).

Our conscious and unconscious fears of death affect our behavior, and a pandemic provides particular challenges for us as individuals as well as our relations with others, but we can use a framework like TMT to anticipate potential problems and thus mitigate, or even prevent, some of those reactions. Freezing up when we hear or see a racist comment may be a common reaction within and beyond an online classroom, but instructors can develop their
understanding to respond differently. Instructors can help learners in their classes to understand why they might become defensive.

TMT provides some guidance for examining a racist comment as a problem that is simultaneously individual, structural, and emotional. Although part of any antiracist project involves some examination of personal responsibility, without a tie to policies and structures, it is all too easy to see racism resulting from individualized and unfamiliar evil actors and thus ignores the ever-present context of white supremacist structures (e.g., Crowley & Smith, 2020; Hawkman, 2020; Leonardo & Zembylas, 2013; Moreton-Robinson, 2015), as well as how from moment to moment the same person can be racist or antiracist (e.g., Kendi, 2019; Shim, 2020). Sources of prejudice and its manifestations are complex, but TMT offers some insight into one aspect: defensive emotional reactions. It is important for instructors to realize that a learner (who is otherwise an affable human being) can make a racist comment in an online forum. Racism is, sadly, very ordinary and not reserved for extremists, but the emotionality of realizing that situation can be intense and thwart antiracist goals (Matias, 2014). Furthermore, addressing that racist comment is fraught with difficulty because of the threat to self-esteem, such as exclamations of “I’m not racist!” and hollow moves to innocence such as “I voted for Obama” and “My best friend is Black” (Matias et al., 2016, p. 6), as well as threats to worldview connected to claims of a post-racial society.

It is important for instructors to monitor their own and their students’ emotional responses, and collectively to work through our emotional worlds (Shim, 2014). We can become more aware of what we are feeling and why. By naming the problem and giving some context, we might not fall prey to more destructive tendencies—but this strategy is not enough on its own. It is vital that we also create spaces that make us feel connected to our bodies and communities. A genuine connection with others and a community can shape a group, and thus when members are in a state of mortality salience, they become more adamant in that inclusive value (Vail et al., 2012). However, settler-colonialism and white supremacist ideology is more than just mortality salience—it’s the logic of elimination. Hence, fostering a classroom community built upon Indigenous worldviews is one-way instructors can create a respectful online learning community.

Wahkohtowin as a Possible Solution

This rapid transition to online instruction highlights the importance of explicitly outlining acceptable behavior in communities of learning (both in face-to-face and online). There are unwritten rules about classroom norms with students in the face-to-face classroom which ensure professional and respectful interactions in the classroom. However, in online or remote instruction this may not happen. As previously shared, online dialogue can feel anonymous and, as a result, become racialized, oppressive, and emotionally laborious. Remote students are not sharing physical space with their classmates and cannot experience the reactions of other students. Learners may not feel responsible for their classmates’ wellbeing nor take the time to understand another individual’s lived experience. This situation, in part, could be the result of a Western education system built upon capitalist ideologies and competition rather than collaboration, but it could also be structural racism that enables white settlers to be successful while hindering the success of BIPOC students (Sum & Jessop, 2012).

It is particularly important that a community of learners be built into remote and online classrooms. We assert that explicitly addressing white privilege and weaving wahkohtowin into classroom practices could intercept those students who might believe that racist comments are acceptable in online discourse. We suggest that instructors consider building their communities
upon *wahkohtowin*—the Cree natural law of reciprocity, respect, relationship, and responsibility—early in their course so as to minimize racism in the online classroom (Borrows, 2012). *Wahkohtowin* promotes classrooms and communities of learning as sites of kinship while valuing differences (Buhler, Settee, & Styvendale, 2016). In this worldview, we are all related—including our other than human kin—and we are in a reciprocal relationship with all things (Dumont, 1996; Wildcat, 2018). Reciprocity, or how we ensure that we are giving back or taking care of everyone and everything, is paramount to an equitable, inclusive, and diverse learning community. Within an online or remote course, the instructor must not only embody these principles but consciously enact these tenets of building a respectful community.

As an instructor in the Faculty of Education, Educational Policy Studies, at the University of Alberta, one of our authors, Jennifer Ward, grounds their teaching practice and classroom ethos in *wahkohtowin*. Recent feedback from students has been overwhelmingly positive. Students who are pre-service teachers learn how to weave community-engaged pedagogy into their K-12 teaching practice through experiential learning opportunities. Students share their feelings of being a part of a community—built upon *wahkohtowin*—and feel that both they and their ideas are respected when engaging in remote learning with their peers.

Instructors need to do the hard work of building community in their classrooms, which may mean more social-emotional connections with students. Although this approach takes effort, it will create a much more respectful community. Fears of appropriating Indigenous practices, such as *wahkohtowin*, in the classroom by non-Indigenous scholars can be mitigated through acknowledging that this practice is a *nehiyaw* (Cree) worldview and pedagogy (Kovach, 2009; Wilson, 2008). Moreover, Indigenous and settler scholars Buhler, Settee, and Styvendale (2016) showcase the use of *wahkohtowin* in the classroom is an important process that disrupts settler-colonialism and hierarchical structures that exist in universities (p. 101). Jennifer Ward is also an Educational Developer-Indigenous Focus at the University of Alberta and she supports the weaving of Indigenous pedagogies into teaching and learning. She encourages instructors to use *wahkohtowin* as a way to engage students and create a respectful learning environment that is based upon respect, relationship, reciprocity, and responsibility.

The pandemic response to online/remote course delivery has impacted how we deliver course content and the idea of a course community. What does it mean to be in relationship with one another? For *wahkohtowin* to occur, trust must be built. But how can we build trust and true accountability in this panopticon of an online environment? Such an approach can take a variety of forms. Instructors could upload an introduction video of themselves and encourage students to do so as well. Instructors might introduce themselves in a more personal way other than their academic credentials. As an example, Indigenous folks often introduce themselves by the land, relatives, and ancestors they are connected to so that we might find other relatives and connections we did not know existed. In doing this we can begin the groundwork for relationships and community.

Being vulnerable and open to other people’s ideas is necessary for the creation of an empathetic and generous community that embodies relationality and reciprocity. Robin Wall-Kimmerer (2013) deftly argues that “reciprocity is a matter of keeping the gift in motion through self-perpetuating cycles of giving and receiving” (p. 165). We must disentangle the concept of individual-personal success as the arbiter of societal success. A community of learners is more successful when they learn to rely upon and be of service to others, thus acting out of kindness rather than in competition with their student colleagues. Learning about and from one another is the greatest gift we can give as humans since gifts from one another establish a relationship built on reciprocity (Wall-Kimmerer, 2013). Within the classroom, if learners create and abide by
their community’s value system of wahkohtowin, the learning environment can be generative and inclusive rather than exclusive, thus limiting racist discourse in the online/remote classroom.

**Concluding Thoughts**

In an effort to support instructors, the University of Alberta CTL hosted a podcast and a webinar to address racism in the classroom in response to a reported rise in racist comments during the pivot to remote learning. Although instructors did not want to let racist comments stand, they needed the tools with which to change the conversation or to mitigate racist dialogue. Racism and racist ideologies towards Black, Indigenous and People of Colour (BIPoC) are not new, but they are an indication that our society has a racism problem stemming from white privilege and settler colonialism. Moreover, terror management theory (TMT) explains that mortality salience triggers peoples’ anxiety about death and leads to engagement in racist discourse or blaming certain cultural groups for the pandemic. To thwart racism in the classroom, instructors should ensure that classroom values align with Nehiyawak (Cree) kinship values of wahkohtowin—reciprocity, respect, relationship, and responsibility—which are necessary for the creation of an inclusive learning community.

**References**


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