

# Educational Reconciliation: Implementing Traditional Land-Based Learning in Canadian Universities

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**ABSTRACT** Indigenous groups across Turtle Island, the name given to North America by the Lenape, Iroquois and Anishinaabe, are often marginalized in the creation of contemporary theories and policies, creating a knowledge gap between the traditional Indigenous ways of teaching, and knowing in academia. Land-based learning encompasses the ways of knowing of Indigenous groups, and when implemented as part of the ii' taa'poh'to'p, the University of Calgary Indigenous Strategic Plan promotes the decolonization of current pedagogies and the understanding of the importance of land to Indigenous peoples. We aimed to decolonize a university course through land-based learning and bridge the gap between Western and Indigenous knowledge, while remaining respectful of Indigenous protocols and inflicted traumas by settler-colonial goals to extract knowledge from their communities. This study sought to research how land-based learning could be integrated into an Indigenous Studies course on animal-human relationships at the University of Calgary. Through a qualitative study of peer-reviewed sources predominantly written by Indigenous authors, we found common themes on how we could implement land-based learning into the course. Based on our findings, we propose a three-part learning module. Firstly, students should be introduced to the topic of land-based learning before attempting a land-based activity. Secondly, we suggest the incorporation of a land-based activity be led by an Indigenous Knowledge Holder or Elder. Lastly, the learning module should be finalized with a class discussion and self-reflection assignment to provide students with the opportunity to solidify their learning. Canada must reconcile the broken relationship between Indigenous groups, the Earth, and our current institutions. The integration of traditional ways of knowing promotes the resurgence of Indigenous ways of being in education.

## INTRODUCTION

Post-secondary institutions in Canada are currently rooted in settler-colonial pedagogies and epistemologies that emphasize Western dichotomies (Bang et al., 2014; Calderon, 2014; Little Bear, 2000; Marker, 2019). Language taught in classrooms is centred on noun-based, product-oriented, and static paradigms (Little Bear, 2000). Often, we are taught to view the environment through a paternalistic lens, as stewards that hold dominion over the world around us (Bang et al., 2014). These epistemologies have been in place for centuries, ironically, as a society that favours progress, a paradigm shift is more than overdue (Little Bear, 2000; Mashford-Pringle & Stewart, 2019). Indigenous ways of knowing provide ways of learning that are different from dominant pedagogies since they are not materialistic but spiritual, as the land is a conscious being and language is centred in processes and relationships (Bartmes & Shukla, 2020; Calderon, 2014; M. J. Barrett & Brad Wuetherick, 2012).

Although the ways of knowing of different Indigenous groups on Turtle Island (indigenous term by some groups for North America) are unique, land-based learning encompasses the traditional ways of learning across Indigenous peoples (Datta, 2018; Mashford-Pringle & Stewart, 2019; McKim et al., 2019; Snowshoe & Starblanket, 2016; Wildcat et al., 2014). Indian Residential Schools (IRS), the Sixties Scoop, assimilation policies and even current child welfare systems have displaced Indigenous peoples from the land, their source of teaching and spiritual healing to which they tie their identity and culture (Wildcat et al., 2014). The severed spiritual connection with the land was the most significant obstruction to healthy well-being and has led to intergenerational consequences in Indigenous peoples (Fellner, 2018; Mashford-Pringle & Stewart, 2019; Snowshoe & Starblanket, 2016).

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The Truth and Reconciliation Commission made 94 Calls to Action to redress the harm of Indian Residential Schools and move towards Canadian reconciliation. Therefore, in the spirit of the 94 Calls to Action, introducing land-based learning into post-secondary institutions could decolonize the ways of learning in university courses (TRC, 2021). Decolonizing our ways of knowing and teaching would serve to bridge the gap between Western and Indigenous knowledge and honor the thousands of children found in unmarked graves across Turtle Island that were forcibly removed from their homes to assimilate to Western pedagogies and epistemologies. Here in Mohkinstis, the traditional Blackfoot name of Calgary, some classes in the University of Calgary's Department of Education (2021) have successfully implemented land-based learning for future educators. Additionally, there have been successful youth-oriented educational programs by the Canadian Education Association (2017) that have implemented land-based teachings. However, there is still a lack of implementation of Indigenous pedagogies in post-secondary settings across Turtle Island (Little Bear, 2000; Mashford-Pringle & Stewart, 2019; Mowatt et al., 2020).

Our research aims to explore how land-based learning could be implemented into an Indigenous studies course on animal-human relationships at the University of Calgary. Firstly, our research aimed to remedy the knowledge gap in the practice of decolonizing classrooms by conducting a qualitative study through a review of land-based learning literature by Indigenous authors. To contextualize our research, a systematic review was necessary to effectively organize the literature by common themes of land-based learning. Secondly, we proposed an outline of the application of land-based learning supported by our literature review. Lastly, our research can contribute to the *ii' taa'poh'to'p*, the University of Calgary Indigenous Strategic Plan (2017) to promote Indigenous ways of knowing and general comprehension of the importance of land to Indigenous people. Our research does not aim to place Western and Indigenous pedagogies in opposition to each other or in interrelation but rather promotes the resurgence of Indigenous ways of being in Alberta.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Our review determined that the difference in the significance of the land between the Indigenous and Western perspectives, and the meaning of spirituality appointed to the land by Indigenous peoples was more profound than typically understood by Western academics. The importance of the land was found to go beyond the spirituality held by ancestors buried in the land; it extended to the land holding a spirituality as it is perceived a living, breathing being and a teacher in itself (Fellner, 2018; Styres, et al., 2013).

Bartmes and Shukla (2020) explored how to implement land-based pedagogies at the post-secondary level. From their study, they highlighted the obstacles the students faced when trying to understand land-based learning and submerging themselves in the activities. Many students had no prior knowledge in land-based learning and found the non-systematic and non-institutionalized Indigenous ways of knowing difficult to conceptualize. Therefore, our resolve to this obstacle was to first introduce the students to land-based learning in a text-based form as Westernized students are accustomed to learning. From a case study by Hansen (2018), the profound perspective of the land from

Cree Elders and concluded that no one other than Indigenous Elders or Knowledge Holders could appropriately convey the importance of the land to students when implementing land-based learning into a course. The Elders concurred that the connection Indigenous peoples have faced with the land due to colonization was deeply severed. Still, the Cree Elders believed that through land-based learning grounded in cultural taught through oral traditions, ceremony and being on the land can decolonize our current teachings, Indigenize education for Indigenous students and promote the well-being of the Opaskwayak Cree Nation (Hansen, 2018). Cassidy and Marsden (2009) attempted to implement Aboriginal ways of knowing at the elementary level by using practices such as talking circles, drum making, sweats and ceremonial dances. Experiential activities that can be used in land-based learning and concluded a field trip led by an Elder or Knowledge Holder would provide the space for a culturally sensitive activity in the land (Cassidy & Marsden, 2009).

While the literature used in this study extensively contextualized land-based learning, the importance of the land from the Indigenous perspective, and examples of implementation of land-based learning in other settings, it is not a perfect replacement for Indigenous voices. It would be beneficial to attain ethical approval to interview Indigenous Elders and Knowledge Holders to expand this study and create a learning module under the guidance of Indigenous voices. With their counsel, a learning module specific to Mohkinstis could be created, with greater significance to the students. Similarly, with our study as a precedent, more applications could be done to implement land-based learning at other post-secondary institutions.

## METHODS

This study adopted a qualitative methodology of thematic analysis of common themes found in academic literature predominantly written by Indigenous authors. Articles were chosen firstly based on their use of keywords such as decolonization, Indigenous learning/pedagogies, Indigenous Ways of Being, land-based learning/pedagogies, Indigenous education/pedagogy, and/or place-based learning/pedagogies. Place-based learning in this context was defined as learning on the land without the acknowledgement of Indigenous knowledges and practices associated with this type of experiential learning (Zandvliet, 2013). Secondly, we searched for sources through Indigenous databases (i.e., University of Saskatchewan Indigenous studies portal research tool) to ensure our findings came from Indigenous authors over non-Indigenous authors, who may be biased by a Western perspective. Since this study did not acquire ethical approval for conducting interviews with Indigenous knowledge holders, teachers, etc., the use of sources predominantly written by Indigenous authors attempted to compensate for the lack of transcript data from Indigenous voices.

The common themes found in our analysis were interpreted for the purpose of finding a culturally appropriate and rational way of implementing land-based learning into a previously text-based pedagogical approach in university classrooms. Our initial findings were presented to the students enrolled in the Indigenous studies course on animal-human relationships at the University of Calgary at the time of the study (Winter 2021 term). This was

accomplished through two 20-minute presentations, which allowed us to present our main findings, pilot sections that would be proposed in how to implement our findings into the course and present an outline of a learning module that disseminated our findings. Feedback from the students and the course instructors was collected through a survey where they were asked to anonymously give their thoughts and concerns on the learning module presented considering their experience with the course content. Comments included what they did and did not like about the module presented, what aspects they would change, and any other comments they thought should be considered in the study. From their assessments, the learning module was adjusted to include our findings from the literature, while also considering the perspectives collected in the survey of individuals with experience in the course as instructors and students.

We applied a methodology similar to that used by Bartmes and Shukla (2020), who interviewed Cree Elders on their perspective of land-based pedagogies used in post-secondary settings, as well as instructors, administrators and students that participated in land-based pedagogies in post-secondary settings such as classes, clubs or events held by the institution. Literature from Indigenous authors coupled with the observations from individuals in the course, brought together the ideas of traditional land-based learning as well as the learning environment at the University of Calgary for which our findings were targeted. We consistently considered how to avoid colonizing land-based learning through our Western lens, cultural appropriation, and unintentionally creating a hybridized pedagogy that was not true to the traditional land-based learning described in the literature.

## RESULTS

### Qualitative Themes

*Indigenous ways of knowing & Western pedagogies.* Indigenous ways of knowing can differ for each Indigenous group (Datta, 2018; Mashford-Pringle & Stewart, 2019; McKim et al., 2019; Snowshoe & Starblanket, 2016; Wildcat et al., 2014). Here we focus on common themes that these different groups share based on the literature reviewed. The Western perspective views the land as a resource, a habitat, or similarly like a thing and place (Little Bear, 2000; Mashford & Pringle, 2019). Western epistemologies view the land as where people and animals live, where we get our resources from, such as fossil fuels, water, or wood (Bang et al., 2014). The Indigenous perspective is not materialistic, it is spiritual (Hansen, 2018) as the land is seen as a conscious being with which people must have a reciprocal relationship. From the Indigenous perspective, the land is their source of knowledge and strength (Wildcat et al., 2014), and is home to the plant people, tree people, four-legged, flyers, crawlers, swimmers, rock people. Indigenous ways of knowing views all beings, which includes the land, are sacred and a necessary part of life that is interconnected, and dependent on one another (Allen, 2008; Redvers, 2018). Indigenous communities see the land as spiritual and healing in nature as many Elders teach that the Creator provided the people with the land to both live on and sustain (Hansen, 2018). Indigenous sociologist Duane Champagne (2015) describes the Indigenous people as guests of the Creator who have the sacred task of sharing the land with other powerful beings that they had

to show respect to along with the land. The Mi'kmaq First nation people believe all things are part of nature and must be treated with respect (Robinson, 2014). Actions such as digging up plant roots for medicine or killing an animal for food should result in giving thanks for things that are used in personal use (Robinson, 2014). Mi'kmaq oral stories describe that if the remains of an animal were not treated with respect (used to make something or buried) the spirit of the world passed this onto the living animals which would then not permit themselves to be captured and killed (Robinson, 2014).

*Land as teacher.* Land-based learning is learning from the land while considering our physical, mental, spiritual, and emotional connection to it (Legge & Robinson, 2017). This is a common thread in Indigenous epistemology rooted in the Medicine Wheel (Canadian Education Association, 2017). The Medicine Wheel teachings focus on the interconnectedness of the four aspects of well-being which include the mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional (Fellner, 2018; Karanja, 2019). This method recognizes the land as a conscious being that has teachings to give the learner (Fellner, 2018; Styres, et al., 2013).

*Land-based learning is experiential;* it is never separated from day-to-day life (Bowra et al., 2020). It flows with hunting, fishing, and other subsistence practices. Examples of this type of learning include smudging and storytelling, remembering childhood connection to the land, recognizing urban-rural dichotomies, and deconstructing Western pedagogies (Styres, et al., 2013). Stories passed down from past generations have long been used to teach in traditional and Western settings (Davis, 2014; Fellner, 2018). Previous research has shown how Indigenous knowledge has provided context and meaningful connections between students and what they are studying (Howard & Kern, 2017). Additionally, environmental conservation efforts and the success of Indigenous individuals in educational institutions could be increased by implementing land-based learning and other Indigenous ways of being in Canada (Canadian Education Association, 2017; Corn tassel, 2012; Tuck et al., 2014)

*Land-based is not place-based.* Decolonizing the classroom means acknowledging the difference between place-based and land-based learning (Bowra et al., 2020). Place-based learning is simply learning in an outside setting without acknowledging the Indigenous knowledge that this practice comes from (Zandvliet, 2013). Land-based learning should centre the practice in Indigenous ways of knowing. This means opening oneself up to the transformative experience of learning from and on the land.

### Proposed Learning Outline

*Text-based Introduction to Land-Based Learning.* The introduction of land-based learning is centred around the introduction of the land from the Indigenous perspective. A study by Bartmes and Shukla (2020) implemented land-based learning in Manitoba universities and found that students benefited from learning the context of land-based learning as text-based knowledge before their land-based activity. The teachings are introduced with a land acknowledgement relevant to the location of the course. The land acknowledgement is a starting point to discuss with the class how they perceive the land acknowledgement, followed by an explanation of how the Western perspective differs from the

Indigenous perspective because of the different significance put on the land by Indigenous groups.

*Indigenous Elder & Learning on the Land.* The text-based introduction is followed by a land-based activity held by an Indigenous Knowledge Keeper to bridge the gap between learning about the land and land-based learning. The study by Bartmes and Shukla (2020) found that students had a difficult time completely focusing on their land-based activity when they were unclear of how they would be graded. Therefore, the students are assured that they will be marked based on participation only. This activity is held on the weekend to increase the amount of time the students can learn from the activity, as Indigenous Knowledge holders have found that the rushed scheduling of post-secondary classes take away from the nature of land-based learning (Bartmes and Shukla, 2020). In the spirit of reciprocity, ceremonial Elder, Andy Black Water, suggests that anyone can provide a small offering (berries, tobacco, or small pieces of cloth) when engaging with reciprocity on the land. (Sosiak, 2015). At this point, the group can meditate on their relationship with the land and the people under the guidance of the Elder.

It is also important for educators to note that we cannot ask Indigenous peoples for free emotional labor. This means being in a cyclical relationship with Elders and Knowledge Keepers that is continuously renewed and reciprocated even after the activity has ended.

*Reflection.* Following the land-based activity, we recommend having a class discussion. If the classroom is regularly scheduled in a theatre-style room, we propose that this lesson be moved to a room where seating can be moved to allow for the students to sit facing each other. Discussing in an even level room allows the students to engage in a discussion more deeply on an equal level than in a theatre facing the backs of other students and looking onto the professor only (Zandvliet, 2013). The class discussion serves to open a conversation between the students on their experience with the land-based activity, what they learned, and how their perspective has or has not changed as a result.

## DISCUSSION

In exploring how to implement land-based learning into a course at a university that uses Western practices of education, we aim to be culturally sensitive throughout the research process. This is particularly important as researchers without Indigenous descent. The learning module is created to outline how Indigenous ways of knowing (i.e., land-based learning) can be implemented into a course by decolonizing the classroom and integrating Indigenous voices into courses that teaches on Indigenous land. Decolonizing the ways of learning in education goes beyond reconciliation with Indigenous groups but also works to promote the resurgence of Indigenous ways of being in society.

The learning module is the result of our thematic analysis of the literature that explored the meaning of the land to Indigenous groups, the use of land-based learning, practices used in land-based learning, and studies that attempted to use land-based learning in Western settings. We attempt to bridge the knowledge gap on Indigenous ways of knowing by focusing on literature by Indigenous authors that effectively describe Indigenous epistemologies and their origin.

This study gives an outline of how land-based learning could be implemented into other courses at the University of Calgary.

It is our aspiration that this research and learning module could be used to incorporate Indigenous ways of being at all learning levels in Canada. Particularly in the University of Calgary, we think it is appropriate to include Indigenous ways of being when teaching the culture and knowledge to students. Promoting the resurgence of Indigenous ways of being via education in Canada holds value as it goes past simply apologizing (Corntassel, 2012; Pugh et al., 2019; Wildcat et al., 2014). By learning from the Indigenous connection to the land, Western society can learn and promote Indigenous ways of being by removing ourselves from colonial practices we contribute to (Simpson, 2000; Wildcat, 2014). Future implementation of land-based learning should be done with consent and input from local Indigenous communities since there are different Indigenous practices across Turtle Island.

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## Conflicts of interest

This author declares no conflicts of interest.

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