

Considerations Before Integrating Indigenous Studies at NCS

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Lead From Where You Are

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In my position as the senior class teacher, and history educator for grades three through eight at Northumberland Christian School (NCS), it has become my responsibility to carry out a new mandate from the Board of Directors to integrate Indigenous studies into the broader curriculum. Normally I would leap at this opportunity, passionate as I am about Indigenous studies and teaching decolonized material. It would also appear that this task is a technical, rather than adaptive, challenge. Taking what has been taught in the Indigenous studies block and integrating it into the regular curricula certainly appears to be something that can be “resolved through the application of authoritative expertise and through the organization’s current structures, procedures, and ways of doing things” (R. Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 19). I have been teaching both subjects for over a decade and have been researching and connecting with Indigenous educators and historians throughout. The process of historical instruction at NCS is also well established and would adequately accommodate this directive. However, it comes on the heels of significant political, spiritual, and community upheaval, it was directed from more of a placatory than genuine intent, and thus stands to either carry forward the work of Indigenous studies at NCS, or stifle it. First, I will detail the background of the mandate, as both a way of providing context and describing the stakeholders and their potential losses. Second, I will diagnose the adaptive challenge, providing a bird’s eye view of the political landscape in which I will be working. Finally, I will explore the strategies before me and reflect on my ability to carry out this mandate with both honest vulnerability and appropriate authority.

How can I look back on the events of the past year and give an unbiased account of what led the Board to mandate the integration of Indigenous studies? I am a stakeholder. I helped to pioneer the Indigenous studies block at NCS, took over the primary delivery of the curriculum shortly thereafter, and have even taught workshops illustrating how it is done at our school. Our school has made a name for itself in the way it has walked with our

neighbouring First Nations community and taught the story of Indigenous peoples from a Christian perspective. Personally, my own experience has taught me the importance of looking at history instruction with more than one set of ‘cultural eyes.’ I reject the propagation of colonial mythology that has served the loudest voice in the room for far too long. As a follower of Jesus, I renounce the “diseased theological imagination (such as Christendom, the Doctrine of Discovery, and the myth of Anglo-Saxon purity) [that] contributed to a dysfunctional social imagination (white supremacy) that has perpetuated unjust leaders, systems, and structures” (Charles & Rah, 2019, ch. 2, “...Metaphors,” para. 10). However, if I am to exercise leadership in this area, I must be able to follow Heifetz and Laurie who emphasize that “leaders have to be able to view patterns as if they were on a balcony” (2001, p. 132); to be part of the action, but also rise above it; look outward and inward to watch for patterns and reactions; endeavour to “generate a more complete picture of the bits and pieces that are presented by the individuals and various factions” (Williams, 2005, p. 31). These include, but are not limited to, my own.

In the fall of 2020 a student in my class from Alderville First Nation requested to lead a prayer circle in Indigenous studies preceded by a smudge. He wanted to show his classmates how his family prayed in a culturally significant way. Smudging was both covered in our curriculum and had been facilitated at NCS in the past so I agreed. When the announcement was published in our weekly newsletter, there was significant resistance from a faction of families who demanded that the smudge be cancelled. It was not. While blindsided by the demand, and berated in an impromptu town hall-turned-mob, the leadership was adamant that it go forward. The ensuing racial, political, and religious tensions would eventually result in a loss of trust and confidence in our staff and Indigenous studies programming, the temporary loss of our principal who required a leave of absence, and ultimately the loss of those resistant families from our school community. These nearly

catastrophic events occurred because of, “politics, behavioural misalignment, and inconsistency” (Lencioni, 2012, p. 11). As the conflict was unfolding, the Board of Directors tried to balance the mission and vision of the school, the integrity of the Indigenous studies programming, and those who taught and supported it, with the potential loss of trust, relationships, and tuition of the families who opposed it. In an attempt to align competing ideologies, the Board heard about the pedagogy of a Mi’kmaq-Acadian professor and theologian at Tyndale University who advocated for the integration of Indigenous perspectives throughout all fields of education. Eager to respond in a way that might be accepted by all parties, the Board issued a mandate to remove Indigenous studies as its own course of study and integrate it into the broader curriculum. On one hand, this would enable them to remove it from both the rotation and the spotlight. On the other, this integration would seemingly follow best practices as described by the professor. How this integration will be carried out, either as a muzzle or an opportunity, has become my adaptive challenge.

This mandate falls squarely within the definition of an adaptive challenge because it requires every stakeholder to evaluate, and even change their “priorities, beliefs, habits, and loyalties. Making progress requires going beyond any authoritative expertise to mobilize discovery, shedding certain entrenched ways, tolerating losses, and generating the new capacities to thrive anew” (R. Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 19). One stakeholder group, the families who resisted the experiential learning opportunity, have removed themselves, and their tuition, from the equation. This has both eased the tension surrounding Indigenous studies, and left a wound that is fresh and tender for all those who remain. Another, the Board of Directors, are both exhausted by months of letters, meetings, threats, assertions, demands, questions, and accusations all compounded by running a school amidst the COVID pandemic with a deficit budget. The teachers, including myself, constitute another group of stakeholders, one committed to teaching Indigenous studies to our students with excellence,

despite being challenged, questioned, and outright attacked for it. Finally, the parents in our community who remain, as well as potential future ones, may or may not wish to see their children learning this subject in new or traditional ways. This list does not take into consideration the students in our care, as each faction will see what is best for them through their own individual lens.

When the announcement was first made, I was resistant. I feared the loss of an important part of our school identity, our ability to participate in truth and reconciliation, all the progress as allies we had been making thus far, and capitulation to fear, exceptionalism, anger, and racism. However, “exercising adaptive leadership requires distributing significant losses” (R. Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 96). My potential losses are not the only ones to consider. The Board agrees with the teachers and many families in our community that, as Andy Crouch succinctly puts it, “To disengage from the profound needs of those caught in suffering is to reject the call to bear the image of God” (Crouch, 2016, p. 81). Therefore, outside of any provincial or educational mandate, Indigenous studies must continue at NCS. However, the school cannot survive another turbulent exodus, or keep potential enrollments away, either. I trust that all the families who remain would want Indigenous studies to be presented to their children in the best possible way, following best practices, and carried out with excellence. Each of these stakeholder groups see themselves as part of a story. For some it is the story of decolonization and truth and reconciliation, for others it is the story of NCS, a small school with over 40 years to look back on and the hope for many more to come, still others see this challenge as only a small part in the story of their children’s overall educational journey. As the leader entrusted with this task, it is my responsibility to appreciate each narrative and discover how the final result can play a meaningful role within (Williams, 2005, p. 43). This evaluation and integration of perspectives is essential before any action can be taken because, “Above all, meaningful action participates in a story. It has a past and a future. Meaningful

action does not just come from nowhere, and it does not just vanish in an instant—it takes place in the midst of a story that matters” (Crouch, 2016, p. 36).

This story, while simultaneously feeling to some like an activist, crisis, transition, or even possibly a maintenance challenge from the ground floor, is, when viewed from the balcony, far more of a creative challenge. Essentially, and despite the intentions, resistance, or excitement surrounding the mandate, the staff at NCS has been directed to teach Indigenous studies in a way they have never done before. As Williams describes, “a creative challenge requires a significant break with the past and an unconstrained leap into the future” (2005, p. 165). This brings about its own set of challenges, but also a certain creative freedom that, given the right conditions, can create something even better than before. Of course, diagnosing the problem is really only the first step. Actually solving the problem “must be viewed as a sense making activity that includes all factions affected by the prevailing reality” (Williams, 2005, p. 13). As stated above, some of the factions have already removed themselves from the equation, however, there are still mixed and tender feelings that need to be considered in moving forward. We are vulnerable, but, as Andy Crouch says, “The vulnerability that leads to flourishing requires risk, which is the possibility of loss – the chance that when we act, we will lose something we value” (Crouch, 2016, p. 41). We have already lost. The opposing families have left. Those toxic and angry demands are no longer hanging over us. There is hope for greater flourishing that is possible to embrace in moving forward. Hope is a story everyone can get behind, it is a great starting point for making sense out of what is to be done next. At the moment that hope may be clouded in uncertainty, unresolved trauma, weariness, regret, and sadness, but once those realities have been addressed, the remaining factions are committed to engaging in a hopeful exercise that will ultimately lead to flourishing. This has been the story of NCS since its inception. The small

school with a unique identity that forges through in good times and bad to give its children excellence in Christian education.

It will not be easy, and it *should not* happen quickly. Keeping Williams' leadership strategies for a creative challenge in mind will be crucial in the upcoming months and years as this integration unfolds (2005, p. 187). First, the year must begin with rejuvenation, growth, and positivity. September is not the time to leap back into the ring and hash everything out. Our community needs time to heal before we examine the scars. We have planned some very specific and simple integration strategies for the upcoming term. In the first term, we will highlight the new National Day for Truth and Reconciliation (or Orange Shirt Day, September 30), and treaty week (the first week of November). These will be deliberately excellent in their execution, and every effort will be made, through careful planning and over-communication, to keep all remaining factions feeling safe as they recuperate and their children participate. Second, when the mood has improved and when staff and Board members are again ready to seriously take on this challenge, it will be presented as described above: a sense-making activity that fits within our story of hopeful flourishing. This should be a collaborative effort, with no more top-down mandated decisions. Maybe a positive town hall focused on flourishing, will serve to counter the toxic one from the year before? However it materializes, the various narratives will have to be exposed before they can be aligned. It will require open honesty and vulnerability about the experiences and emotions each person will inevitably carry forward. Despite the pain, "intimate contact with ... reality ... and the ability to reflect on and learn from your own and others' experience are ... what it takes to make such sense" (Schall, 1995, p. 203). This will ultimately test our resilience as a cohesive leadership group, and determine whether or not NCS will continue to be a leader in Indigenous studies altogether. As Weick explains, leaders "develop resilient groups that are capable of four things: improvisation, wisdom, respectful

interaction, and communication” (1996, p. 145). All will be required when the hard work begins. Again, there is great hope for our school if the following months are managed well, if enough time is given to heal and contemplate this integration mandate in the broader scope of our ongoing story. If communication is embraced and shared, if differences are negotiated and compromises found. If those working on this integration are “people for whom trust, honesty, and self-respect are developed, then new options, such as mutual adaptation, blind imitation of creative solutions, and trusting compliance [can be] created” (Weick, 1996, p. 148). In this space, the possibilities for flourishing are endless.

It would be very easy for me to insist that nothing change. What we were doing was *working*, it was a *good thing*, and if it’s not broken, *don’t fix it!* Still, if that truly were the case, would the events that precipitated this Indigenous studies integration mandate have occurred at all? Rather than resist the change, I will hold my personal fear of loss in check and keep my eyes open for the possibility of greater flourishing and stronger connections as we move forward. This process may, indeed, turn out to be a change for the worse. It may erase our roles as allies and leaders in Indigenous education in Christian schools in Ontario. Worse yet, it may damage our longstanding relationships and even lead to further conflict. This challenge we face is important business, meaningful business, but also risky business. However, “Only those who have opened themselves to meaningful risk are likely to be entrusted with the authority that we all were made for and seek” (Crouch, 2016, p. 172).

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