



# Decolonizing our Approaches to Teaching Economics

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## WHAT IS DECOLONIZATION?

Decolonization is the process of **deconstructing the colonial ideologies** that prioritize Western thought and approaches (Cull et al., 2018). It requires **dismantling structures that perpetuate the status quo** and correcting power imbalances. While decolonization promotes a learning environment that is inclusive of all students, efforts to *deconstruct* and *dismantle* may initially be unsettling to students who have been immersed in a Western education system.

## INDIGENIZATION

Western institutions tend to discount Indigenous Knowledge and methods. Decolonization through **Indigenization** manifests as a fundamental shift to **include Indigenous perspectives and approaches**, inform scholarship through **Indigenous Ways of Knowing**, and rely on **cultural practices** and protocol in our institutions.

Indigenization challenges the Western notions of objective neutrality that pervade Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) courses at Western institutions. From an Indigenous perspective, knowledge is relational and cannot be standardized. Indigenization of STEM pedagogy may involve a departure from lecture-based instruction in order to incorporate Indigenous methods such as sharing circles, story telling, and protocol.

Decolonization and Indigenization are ongoing processes that seek to upend a system of thinking. As instructors, we have the opportunity to design our courses to contribute to the ongoing process of decolonizing the Academy. Doing so can ultimately generate benefits for Indigenous and non-Indigenous students, faculty, and staff alike.

## SETTING THE TONE

When we take steps to decolonize our courses, we provide students with a learning experience that may be unfamiliar to them. The adjustment is often easier if we explain the rationale behind course design decisions. In the first week of the course, I issue a statement like the following:

*This course is taught at a Western institution in a settler-colonial state. At every institution, certain perspectives and models are privileged. This course questions that privilege in an effort to decolonize our thinking. The learning objectives for the course are twofold: to acquire new knowledge about economics, and to decolonize the way we think about economics.*

In my **Indigenous Economics** courses,\* I devote the first one to two weeks of the term to introducing students to Indigenous approaches. Students will:

- Read stories from *Braiding Sweetgrass* (Kimmerer, 2013).
  - Learn about principles of sharing circles (Hart, 2002)
  - Introduce themselves using the Indigenous teaching, Tante Ohci Kiya, a Nehiyawkw term that translates to “who are you connected to?”
- [<Belly Button Teaching lesson plan developed by Jennifer Ward>](#)

\*Decolonization is not only for courses with an explicit focus on marginalized communities. I have also taken steps to decolonize my **Urban Economics** courses (see the Teaching Strategies section).

## COURSE ETHOS

I strive to foster a course ethos based on a few key principles, including:

- **Reciprocal Learning** – We are all at some point on our path toward knowledge acquisition. This means that instructors should expect to learn from students and students from each other. According to Tanaka et al. (2007, p. 105), “each student is a person who is becoming.”
- **Lack of Competitiveness** – There are no notions of Western competitiveness in the classroom. We are a community of learners who benefit from others’ successes. Learning is not a zero-sum game.
- **Many “Correct” Answers Exist** – There are many “correct” answers. At the same time, some answers do not exist.

THE COURSE ETHOS TRANSLATES  
INTO PRACTICAL TEACHING STRATEGIES

## TEACHING STRATEGIES

There are many teaching strategies you could adopt to take steps toward decolonization and/or Indigenization. For example, I have employed the following strategies:

- **Bring Marginalized Voices Forward**
  - Assign readings by diverse authors, elevating the scholarship of Indigenous scholars and other scholars of color
  - Require students to cite Indigenous scholars in their essays
  - Invite Elders and Indigenous community leaders to share their wisdom through guest lectures
- **Deprioritize Lectures**
  - Design classes to contain a mixture of lecture and discussion
  - Encourage students to produce their own knowledge through participation in class discussion
  - In online courses, record asynchronous lectures and use synchronous meetings for discussion
- **Incentivize Experiential Learning**
  - “The first principle of Aboriginal learning is a preference for experiential knowledge. Indigenous pedagogy values a person’s ability to learn independently by observing, listening, and participating with a minimum intervention or instruction” (Battiste, 2002).
  - Provide students with the opportunity to receive credit for participating in relevant extracurricular activities
- **Eliminate High-stakes Examinations**
  - Avoid multiple choice or high-stakes examinations
  - Evaluate students based on how well they are able to support an informed opinion
  - Consistent with the viewpoint of relationality, a single, correct answer does not exist
  - Encourage critical thinking through essay-based quizzes, research projects, term papers, etc.
- **Do Not Grade on a Curve**
  - Students are not pitted against one another to achieve a desired grade distribution

- **Provide Opportunities for Collaborative Work**
  - Assign students to small group discussion
  - Allow students to complete select coursework collaboratively
  - Indigenization itself is a collaborative process

## RELATIONALITY IN COURSE DESIGN

Non-Indigenous instructors like myself who have been educated within Western institutions often lack a model for decolonized teaching and learning. For these instructors in particular, the journey to decolonize university courses requires input from Indigenous educators and scholars.

My journey was guided by Jennifer Ward, the Lead Educational Developer, Indigenous-focus at the University of Alberta's Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL). I designed my courses in consultation and collaboration with Jen. While at the CTL, Jen led workshops on decolonizing and Indigenizing your courses, co-hosted a [podcast episode](#) about teaching remotely from an Indigenous perspective (with Jordon Long and Dr. Paul Gareau), and mentored countless other instructors like myself. I am forever grateful for the privilege of learning from and with Jen, for having Jen be such an integral and empowering part of my journey, and for the opportunity to continue the ongoing work of decolonization.

## STUDENT FEEDBACK

“This course...is refreshing, and I think you’re doing an excellent job with challenging the current understanding of Indigenous economics and why we [Indigenous Peoples] are where we are today”

“This course made me feel comfortable and [provided] a safe place to learn”

"I'm thankful to have been in your course, and after looking into an economics minor, I am leaning more towards yes"

"I genuinely want to say thank you for...the freedom of speech and thinking that you provided in the course. It was the most fantastic experience in my four years of learning economics"

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