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Approaching Academic Integrity from the Perspective of Classroom Indigenization and Decolonization

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Abstract: Accompanying students on a journey of unlearning and relearning some key concepts we operate in the classroom to change our traditional colonized and often harmful approaches to knowledge acquisition is the only way to help them amplify their authentic voices and move to the position of knowing the truth, including different approaches, owning their story and not being afraid to share it. One of such key concepts that calls for a reshaped approach is the concept of academic integrity that relies on the definition through fundamental values, historically explained and approached through the lens of colonized perspective and believed to be originating from traditional Western and European knowledge. This paper will attempt to demonstrate how academic integrity can be approached through the lens of Indigenous knowledge and holistic practices, while crediting and celebrating Indigenous perspectives such as using Seven Grandfather Teachings in shaping and explaining the fundamental values of academic integrity, as well as demystifying the bias that academic integrity should not include the cultural lens.



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Introduction

Following its commitment to indigenization and decolonization of post-secondary educational environment as part of the journey to reconciliation, Georgian College has developed *Indigenization Strategy 2022 – 2024*, emphasizing the importance of “... meaningful integration if indigenous ideas, values, peoples, knowledges, symbols, esthetics, and procedures.” (Georgian College, n.d., p. 6), with one of the central pillars including *Pillar 5: Curriculum and Pedagogy*, which aims to amplify the meaningful integration of Indigenous presence and knowledge into the college-wide curriculum to “ensure faculty competence framework includes decolonization and reconciliation as foundation” (Georgian College, n.d., p.21).

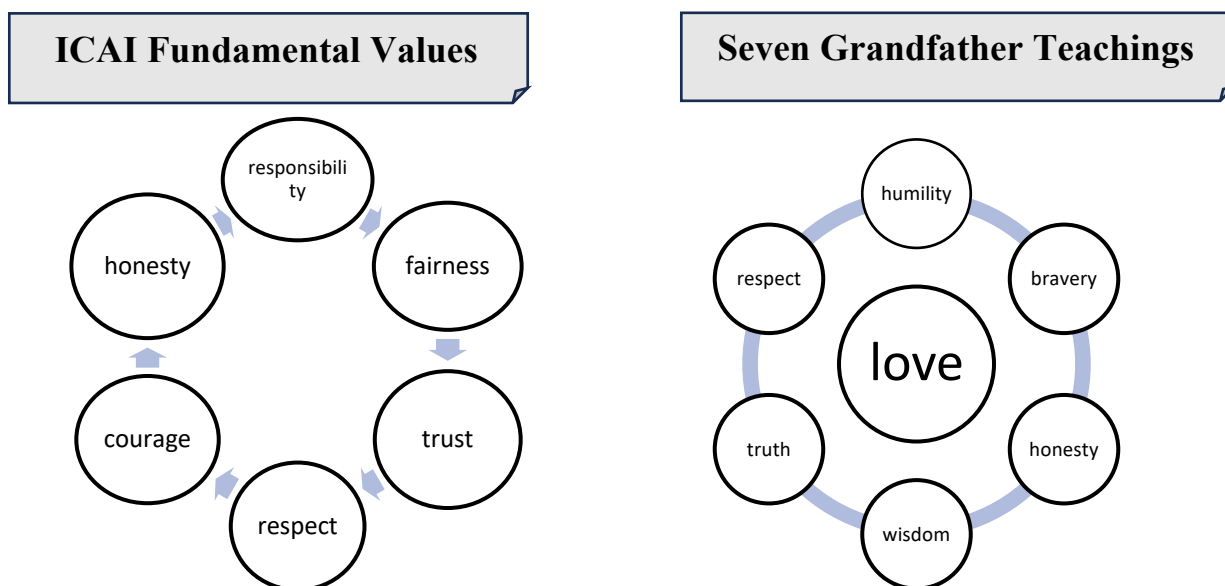
While being far from possessing complete knowledge and understanding of Indigenous history of Canada, I have been passionate about learning and sharing information with my students from the Communication Essentials course in a meaningful way to acknowledge the trauma but celebrate every step towards reconciliation. Most of my expertise and interests, as well as the work I am involved in as a support staff and a member of Georgian College Research Ethics Board is related to academic integrity; therefore, traditionally introducing the values of academic integrity through the definition offered by International Centre for Academic Integrity (ICAI) (2021) and European Network for Academic Integrity (ENAI) (2019), I realized that this approach was lacking cultural perspective and was leaving out Indigenous ethical values that would have been more meaningful and culturally significant for students who are getting their education in Canadian post-secondary institutions, regardless of whether they hold the status of domestic or international students. At the same time, *Indigenous Academic Integrity Project* developed with support from the University of Calgary (Gladue, 2021) and Indigenous values of *Seven Grandfathers Teachings* (Uniting Three Fires Against Violence, n.d.) offer a holistic and relationship-based approach to academic and personal integrity by introducing culturally and spiritually meaningful values. Since Indigenous Peoples are approaching research and knowledge primarily from the perspective of their place in the universe, the way they acquire and pass on knowledge is based on the principles of reciprocity, respect, and rationality that account for good relations with other people and the environment as well as Indigenous systems of knowledge (Gladue, 2020). This holistic approach is incorporating both the cultural component and the idea that it is impossible to separate academic integrity from overall personal integrity – having integrity implies practicing it in all life situations, while treating yourself, other people and their work with fairness and respect.

Comparing some of the definitions from the six fundamental values of academic integrity outlined by ICAI only quite recently, some thirty

years ago, and the values from Seven Grandfathers Teachings passed on from one generation to another for centuries, we can find a lot in common while recognizing that Seven Grandfathers Teachings have a deeper meaningful value and aim at nurturing integrity through teachings within any community by rooting it in morality, and can be applied to academic environment. By upholding integrity in academic setting, the student is learning to demonstrate it in society, community and their relationships with land and environment.

The Communication Essentials class that is a mandatory pre-requisite course almost all students in the first semester of their college programs need to take was a perfect platform for incorporating insights from Indigenous educational systems and offering an alternative, culturally rich approach to the values that constitute academic integrity. Following the traditional Indigenous way of sharing knowledge, oral knowledge transmission, I introduced the Teachings to my students through videos, using Ontario Native Women's Association (ONWA) (2022) *7 Grandfathers Teachings* videos to follow the Indigenous tradition of passing knowledge through telling stories. I also explained how they align with the fundamental values of academic integrity outlined by the International Centre for Academic Integrity:

Figure 1. ICAI Fundamental Values vs Seven Grandfather Teachings



When considering the definitions of the fundamental values of academic integrity and the values represented in the Seven Grandfathers Teachings, we can find multiple intersecting ideas while appreciating the depth and wholesomeness of Indigenous perspective. To get a better understanding of the teachings, I spoke to our institution's Indigenization

Initiatives Lead, Tiffany McCue (Anishnaabe kwe (Ojibwe woman), lives in Barrie, Canada, personal communication, April 16, 2024) and she shared some insights into the interpretation of Indigenous teachings she learned from the Elders.

The first pair of values I studied, comparing their definitions, was *trust* from ICAI and *humility* from 7 Grandfathers Teachings. *Trust*: collaborating and sharing ideas freely ensuring reciprocity, trusting others, and deserving their trust while completing the work in an honest and genuine manner (ICAI, 2021). *Humility* (represented by a wolf): respecting the community, the place of dwelling, living a selfless life while appreciating and praising the accomplishments of others, finding balance between all living things and within yourself (Uniting Three Fires Against Violence, n.d.). It is believed that a wolf who lets down the rest of the pack is punished by being isolated from the community (T. McCue, personal communication, April 16, 2024). In the academic setting, it would mean respecting other people's intellectual property, giving due credit, and not compromising integrity for the sake of a quick gain.

The second respective pair of values was *courage* from ICAI and *bravery* from 7 Grandfathers Teachings. *Courage*: holding oneself and others accountable according to the top standards of academic integrity and one's values even if it means risk of facing negative consequences (ICAI, 2021). *Bravery* (represented by a bear): facing life with courage and being able to meet difficulties and protect personal and community values and beliefs. Finding balance between survival, rest and play and staying true to yourself (Uniting Three Fires Against Violence, n.d.). The significance of the teaching represented by a bear (most often mother-bear) is the fact that mother bear can sacrifice her cub to save other cubs (T. McCue, personal communication, April 16, 2024). In academic setting, making difficult decisions and being ready to face difficult consequences of these decisions, when it entails admitting personal involvement in violating integrity or calling out others doing it.

The next pair of definitions referred to *honesty* from ICAI and *honesty* from 7 Grandfathers Teachings. *Honesty*: being honest with oneself and others when seeking knowledge, striving for lifelong integrity that develops over time (ICAI, 2021). *Honesty* (represented by a raven/sabe): accepting oneself and knowing how to use this gift, being honest with oneself, accepting who you are and using the gifts you were given while never trying to deceive others (Uniting Three Fires Against Violence, n.d.). In academic environment, cheating or breaching integrity in any other way should not be acceptable for the personal morale of a student. Even if the offence was not detected or the student was not punished, they would still know they did the wrong things, so being honest with oneself is crucial.

The definitions of *responsibility* from ICAI and *wisdom* from 7 Grandfathers Teachings intersected on many levels. *Responsibility*: sharing responsibility in holding oneself and others accountable for their actions, opposing any kind of negative peer pressure or wrongdoing (ICAI, 2021).

Wisdom (represented by a beaver): being wise and cherishing knowledge by continuously observing and listening to the life around you, recognizing limitations and differences of yourself and others and acknowledging them in a respectful and supportive way, allowing yourself to learn and use the inherent gifts (Uniting Three Fires Against Violence, n.d.). There is no need trying to jump over one's head and show your work on a level higher than it really is, as it is enough to do what you can best knowing there might be some limitations to what you can accomplish.

The next values were *fairness* from ICAI and *truth* from 7 Grandfathers Teachings. *Fairness*: being transparent, predictable, treating others and being treated fairly, upholding integrity by completing one's own original work, acknowledging the work of others, and maintaining one's own and institutional reputation (ICAI, 2021). *Truth* (represented by a turtle): understanding the importance of both destination and the journey while acting with faith and trust in teachings, speaking sincerely, being true to oneself and everything you do or say (Uniting Three Fires Against Violence, n.d.). As a turtle holds all teachings of life (T. McCue, personal communication, April 16, 2024), truth holds all other fundamental values comprising academic integrity – remaining true to oneself and treating other members of the academic community and their work fairly is significant for personal integrity.

Both ICAI and 7 Grandfathers Teachings had *respect* as their respective value and teaching. *Respect*: showing respect for others and oneself, never compromising one's own values while appreciating diverse, even contradictory opinions, valuing opportunities, and taking active role in one's own education and performing to the best of one's ability. (ICAI, 2021). *Respect* (represented by a buffalo): respecting balance and the needs of others, honoring teachings and acting towards other people and things according to them, never hurting oneself or others and treating them you want to be treated, not being wasteful but being mindful of the balance of all things (Uniting Three Fires Against Violence, n.d.). Respecting the written or spoken words of other people, their opinions and intellectual findings while following the rules is crucial to academic integrity.

Finally, only 7 Grandfathers Teachings had *love* as one of their core teachings with a special emphasis put on its significance as it makes all other teachings more meaningful. *Love* (represented by an eagle): knowing love is knowing peace, so love lies in the core of all teachings, and allows to see one's inner self from that perspective. It allows you to be at peace with the creator, yourself, all things in life and the life itself (Uniting Three Fires Against Violence, n.d.). As an eagle was the one to have faith in mankind, unconditional love and believe they will become good again (T. McCue, personal communication, April 16, 2024), so instructors should have faith students will do the right thing and act with integrity, even if they breached it previously.

One of the reasons the colonial lens is remaining dominant in Canadian post-secondary educational environment is the colonial

aggressive way of knowledge transmission. I share the opinion of Eaton (2024) who points out the fact that some cultures that historically favored oral transmission of knowledge, which is the case with storytelling practice by Indigenous peoples, have, unfortunately, lost ownership of a significant part of that knowledge. Eaton emphasizes that it is having access to printed, recorded knowledge that gave European cultures the advantage of pushing forward their educational systems based on writing, as well as colonizing the oral knowledge they got access to and could claim their ownership for just by documenting it. Therefore, written knowledge transmission received privileges over oral knowledge-sharing, which started being regarded as inferior or was simply overlooked and excluded.

While not trying to claim that the academic integrity values described by European and Western schools of academic integrity are based on the modified Indigenous Seven Grandfathers Teachings, such possibility cannot be ruled out. Until now, there is no known evidence denying or confirming it; therefore, educators need to challenge the colonial perspectives especially with regards to fundamental concepts by selecting their course content with respect and inclusion of Indigenous knowledge systems while building awareness about the importance of promoting Indigenous cultural values and teachings. This is not necessarily to say that there is a need to completely replace the fundamental values as we know them, but there is a need to challenge our biases as well as there is space for studying both systems simultaneously.

In conclusion, introducing students to fundamental concepts through Indigenous teachings and perspectives, and rejecting the imposition of colonial approaches are essential for promoting inclusive and effective education. Classroom decolonization and indigenization can be facilitated by questioning the long-before-adopted traditional dogmas that should be reevaluated and challenged to include different perspectives and ways of knowledge transmission and assessment. One of the first and hardest challenges on this path is understanding that deconstruction of harmful colonial influences is a step towards acknowledging, rectifying historical injustices, and building more inclusive educational environment where students from all backgrounds feel valued and represented. Exposure to Indigenous knowledge systems can help prepare students to engage with fundamental values and concepts in a culturally sensitive and informed manner. If educators truly wish to commit and contribute to their institutions' pledges for reconciliation, they should put effort into promoting understanding, empathy, and mutual respect through meaningful acknowledgement and inclusion of Indigenous history and knowledge into curriculum development and pedagogy.

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Conflict of Interest

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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