Reversing the gaze: Decolonizing the syllabus*

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Where do you begin telling someone their world is not the only one?
Lee Maracle, Stó:lō Nation[1]

This paper reflects efforts of decolonization in higher education.[2] It offers a take on syllabus design by sharing some underlying principles and practices found effective over the years.

The paper draws on my experiences of learning and teaching. My graduate studies in the early 2000s at the Department of Linguistics at the University of British Columbia shaped me. There and then, Dr. Hotze Rullmann, the entire linguistics faculty, and the Indigenous language consultant Elders quietly, implicitly instilled in me principles that I have grown to embrace in my teaching practice. The paper makes the implicit practices explicit.

The practices reported here also rely on the never-ending dialogue that I have with my students at the University of Rochester (US). Striving to decolonize my own syllabi, I stumble across gaps in knowledge. For example, often an entire class does not know what boarding schools for Indigenous people were or has an entrenched idea that the local Indigenous population of Rochester or the entire New York state is long dead.

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* Dr. Rullmann was on my dissertation committee and spent endless hours convincing me of possible worlds, semantically and metaphorically. I will always be grateful for his patience.

The title of this paper was provoked by a short speech by Dr. Kim TallBear opening a conference at the University of Alberta, where she stated that "It's a long colonial tradition that Indigenous peoples are at the receiving end of the scientific gaze. It is time to reverse the gaze." I quote from my notes; it comes from an eloquent and poignant YouTube video which has since become, unfortunately, unavailable.

[1] Lee Maracle (2017:61).

[2] This paper started as a well-received talk at the SUNY Council on Writing conference, fall 2021. The intense debate convinced me I should not have fretted that the content of the talk would be old news. As per their website, SUNY CoW is an institution with a long tradition, yet decolonization of the curricula is only being considered now: "Founded in 1980, the SUNY Council on Writing is an independent faculty organization dedicated to improving instruction and promoting scholarship in Writing and Rhetoric across the 64-campus system."

The layout of the paper is as follows. We start with defining decolonization as part of transparent design (Section 1). Then we illustrate colonial bias and means to dislodge it through guided introspection and deploying tools provided by the Critical Language Awareness framework (Section 2). Next, we consider the significance of a specific geographical place as grounding a syllabus (Section 3). The discussion wraps up with appreciation of time and patterns of repetition (Section 4). Brief conclusions are offered last (Section 5).

1 Introduction: Why does a paper on pedagogy matter in the context of linguistics?

This section briefly explains what decolonization is understood to be (as there is more than one take on the matter) and why it is relevant to explicitly state the modus operandi.

1.1 What is decolonization of the syllabus?

A syllabus is part guide, part contract. It is partially a guide in that it lays out what will happen throughout the semester. It includes course policies, rules, and regulations, required texts and/or media, and a schedule as well as content of assignments. It can tell you nearly everything you need to know about how a course will be run and what will be expected. It is also partially a contract in that it recounts what the student and the instructor will deliver.

Yet syllabi transcend the student-instructor relationship. They also explicitly or implicitly (more on this in Section 2) manifest the culture and assumptions of the institution they represent. An overview of pedagogy literature[3] and my own experience teaching diverse populations of students (such as first-generation college attendees, inmates at US high and medium security correctional institutions, international students, students from a range of privileged and/or underrepresented groups, etc.) converge on making *transparency* of syllabi and assignment design a priority. Here, transparency refers to explicit statements on course goals and learning objectives as well as the means deployed to achieve them.

For the narrow goals of this paper, transparency is discussed in relation to colonial versus de-colonized stance. That is, the question a reader of a syllabus should ask themselves is whether the syllabus

[3] See Winkelmes et al. (2023) for a recent compilation.

reflects the values and needs of colonial curriculum — usually European white settler, often with Christian undertones — or whether it offers a means to serve and engage with the Indigenous, underrepresented, and marginalized.[4] The (de)colonized stance can be implicit, whether intentional or not; it may be gleaned from conspicuous omissions or gaps, in, e.g., the reading list or particular obscure formulations in the assignment instructions. Said manifestation can also be explicit and intentional, revealing the rationale behind choices to hold up to the student the bias an instructor holds. Transparency in this matter doesn't just score higher or lower ratings on the scale of diversity and inclusion. It also humanizes the student-instructor relation by justifying, at the very least, the authority of the instructor as an expert while simultaneously offering an opportunity and a reason for critical engagement on the part of the student.

1.2 Why is it relevant to consider decolonization of syllabi in the context of linguistics?

While the decolonization of curriculum debate started decades ago,[5] the efforts to implement the change are far from over (for great discussion and examples, see Figueroa 2020; Fuentes et al. 2021). In fact, many institutions and instructors are only beginning to catch onto the healing trend. Evidence of late or slow awakening abounds across institutional policies (e.g., only recently did we see a sweeping Indigenous land recognition momentum[6]) and practices (e.g., decolonizing talks and other

[4] Granted, most syllabi fall on a continuum between the two extremes. This is due to the relative novelty of thinking about transparency of design in this capacity. Even the most well intentioned and driven instructors (current company included) are very much a product of decades of indoctrination by colonial curriculum; it will take time to successfully introspect and change our ways. Another reason for falling short may be lack of the necessary materials or knowledge about how to get such materials.

[5] It depends on how or what one counts. If one goes by the oft-cited seminal work of Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, the English translation first hit the shelves in 1970. If we consider Canada-specific Indigenous efforts, one could build on Battiste et al. 2002. Thinking globally, Māori scholar Smith's work on decolonizing methodologies is widely considered one of the foundational works, first published in 1999. The list could go on. What matters is that there is no longer a lack of relevant Indigenous materials that offer pedagogical frameworks and tools, yet these approaches have yet to infuse curricula of higher education across the fields.

[6] Land recognition statements before events or on institutional policy pages are far from uncontroversial. The debate continues.
https://www.npr.org/2023/03/15/1160204144/indigenous-land-acknowledgments

materials are welcome and sought after[7]). Given that syllabi are manifestations of institutional policies and provide a modus operandi for courses, it is no wonder that forging syllabi more inclusive of the underrepresented is very much in vogue in the ivory towers.

Linguistics finds itself at the center of the decolonizing efforts due to what it is as an object of study (language intersecting with society) and as a tool for both communication (language) and meta-communication (language about language). Given that linguists have been involved in studying the languages of the colonized, we have over a couple hundred years of experience doing fieldwork which made us face the impact of colonization early on. Strides have been made to address the injustices brought to these communities by applying community-based participatory research methods (see Hacker 2013 for a classic overview of the framework); yet the work is far from over.

Here, the focus is narrowly on meta-communication about the content of the syllabi. Specifically, how one could/should/might use language when projecting or questioning a particular (de)colonized stance. While such considerations on meta-communication are necessary for designing linguistics syllabi, they are even more urgent in offering means for change in fields beyond linguistics.

2 Finding ways to engage

In this section, I give a sample of ways I use to dislodge the inertia of colonial thinking through some guided introspection and use of language.

2.1 Of pebbles, shells, and bookshelves

Given that the curriculum across disciplines remains largely Eurocentric, it also remains largely colonial. To address the disproportionate

[7] Due to the page limit, I can only name but a few examples of Indigenous contributions for the sake of transparency. In the arts, the work of Canadians like Kent Monkman stands out (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GwNpUevsKzc). In literature, work by Thomas King (2017) rattles our conventions. The TED talk by Nigerian author Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie has gained a life of its own (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D9Ihs241zeg). In science, the hard-core activism of Kim TallBear (https://kimtallbear.com/) or the poetic ministrations of Robin Kimmerer (2013) come to mind. It is not possible to do justice to the wealth of what would be considered "hot" material available. And while this list of excellent Indigenous materials available is not exhaustive, looking for evidence of institutional change in higher education is exhausting, especially beyond the discipline of anthropology.

dominance, one could perhaps march into the classroom on day one and declare that this course will be decolonized henceforward. Declarations are hardly effective or convincing; if anything, one would run a risk of confusion ("Who, we? We are the good woke guys!") or even resentment ("Oh yeah? I'm good, thanks. Make me!"). The means that I found to be effective are the opposite of public declaration. We start with an embodied silent introspection exercise, a version of an exercise on privilege that has been making the rounds online for a while now.[8]

The exercise goes as follows. At the onset of the class, students are asked to walk around the class where seven stations are set up. At each station, they silently read a vignette and have a choice to pick up either a pebble or a shell or both. Here are the vignettes:

(1) Take a pebble if the language you speak at home is English. Take a shell if you speak an Indigenous language at home.

(2) Take a pebble if you studied the history of the US from the settler perspective at school. Take a shell if you studied the history of the US from the perspective of Indigenous people.

(3) Take a pebble if you can name at least three US writers or artists by name. Take a shell if you can identify at least three Indigenous writers or artists by name.

(4) Take a pebble if you can name at least three US based inventions. Take a shell if you can name at least three Indigenous inventions.

(5) Take a pebble if someone you look up to is a mainstream US icon. Take a shell if someone you look up to is an Indigenous icon.

(6) Take a pebble if you can name three US holidays. Take a shell if you can name three Indigenous traditions.

(7) Take a pebble if you can name three popular US dishes. Take a shell if you can name three Indigenous dishes.

[8] I put together the content of the exercise (improvements and variations are endless). However, the exercise pattern itself was adapted from a workshop on integration of the LGBTQ community, and even there it has been adapted. I have searched the internet trying to get to the authorship of the exercise, but while versions and adaptations of the exercise abound, I have not been able to find the definitive source of origin.

At the end of the exercise, the students have a handful of items and, one hopes, a handful of thoughts. The first impact of the exercise lies in that it is embodied — one has to walk, touch, and collect. It would be strange to stand still and refuse to pick up an item, while it is really easy to ignore a declarative call to decolonize. The memory retains such a practice longer precisely because the whole body is involved. The contrast in touching and looking at pebbles and shells is deliberate, too: at some point in the discussion, I remind the participants that wampum shell beads were used as currency among some North American First Nations. The second impact of the exercise is that I never ask for what they have picked up or why. The recognition of gaps in knowledge is left private and lingers (or so the students tell me). We usually have a lively open-ended discussion when I ask them to share their thoughts after the exercise. This rudimentary check in on one's awareness of how colonial culture dominates and permeates our lives is effective as it reveals the lacuna of knowledge in a discreet private manner.

Another brief effective exercise that goes beyond individual education and reveals the bias in the setup of our knowledge systems is a library search for Indigenous material by Indigenous authors. The prompt is to ask students to find materials authored by, for example, Greek or Roman versus Indigenous authors using an online catalog of, for example, the local university library. The contrast is remarkable. The Eurocentric search gets hundreds of hits within seconds; yet it is nearly impossible to get a hit on an Indigenous author if one does not already know the name of the author and their tribal affiliation. The exercise in futility makes an impact on the discussion on what types of knowledge society legitimizes and prioritizes, often without making the choices transparent. By way of a wrap up, I share with the students my own efforts to get to Indigenous authorships and materials. It took me about four weeks and three librarians[9] to get access to a couple of university library collections dedicated to Indigenous knowledge. This is all they found in North America. Here they are:

1. https://guides.library.ubc.ca/aboriginalstudies/findingindigenousperspectives
2. https://guides.library.queensu.ca/indigenous-studies/finding-authors

[9] Thanks to the University of Rochester librarians who found these collections: Stephanie Barrett, Eileen Daly-Boas, and Margaret Dull.

Both sites are hosted in Canada, and the University of British Columbia library takes the lead. That is, the Library of Congress is not changing their ways any time soon to accommodate alternative sources of knowledge.

2.2 Critical Language Awareness in the classroom

Once we have established, as discussed in Section 2.1, the awareness of how colonial our knowledge and curriculum still are, it is easier to transition into assignments for the course that transparently and deliberately deploy language to maintain the awareness and possibilities of other perspectives.

My assignment instructions and prompts are designed relying on the Critical Language Awareness (CLA) framework (I rely mainly on Shapiro 2022 and Curzan 2014), which provides linguistic tools to improve self-reflection, social justice, and rhetorical agency when creating or analyzing discourse patterns. I apply these tools to mindful use of language in the syllabi and assignments.

Due to constraints of space here and the wealth of literature that already exists, I would not be able to do justice to the CLA framework. I will rather walk the reader through two samples of how its tools can be deployed.

One way to deploy language with critical awareness is to consistently hold up and remind the students of the possible implicit bias or influencing factors that may be affecting their research. To that end, I include the following notice of consideration within my assignment prompts:

> *Consider if such factors as, e.g., your athletic ability, cultural or ethnic background, the education you received, gender, religious affiliation or social class etc. influence your experience and your research practice*.

The hope is that the transparent direct request will make them introspect and that they will eventually pick up a habit of pondering the undercurrent of influences surfacing in their own thought process. I make sure to alert them if anything in their submitted work could be flagged as a factor.

In a similar fashion, dialogic thinking is encouraged through engagement with alternative views, often done in peer groups within in-class workshops. For example, if a student asks a research question such

as *'Why do Navajo retain their traditional sustainable practices even if it makes them fail in mainstream US economy?'*, an alternative question we forge in class might be *'Why does the settler economy fail to take into account the sustainable practices of the Navajo?'* The hope is that the student sees how the tables can be turned depending on the worldview and that only by answering *both* questions can we get closer to the truth of the matter.

Another effective deployment of Critical Language Awareness is a comparative exercise that helps to tease apart patterns of thought and discourse in traditional Western scholarly texts and an Indigenous approach that may question the established patterns. A chapter from Kimmerer's (2013) book begs for such a comparison. Kimmerer, as you may know, is a botanist who completed her Ph.D. in a mainstream North American university. Then she immersed herself in her native Potawatomi ethnobotany. The result is *Braiding Sweetgrass*, a book that fuses and compares both traditions, implicitly and explicitly.

The structure of the chosen chapter follows the traditional layout of a peer-reviewed research paper: it has an introduction, research question, methodology section, references etc. Yet the content of the chapter puts the Western approach to test. Due to constraints of space, we will look at two small excerpts from the chapter compared to two corresponding excerpts from an actual research paper.

Sample excerpt from the introduction to the chapter:

> You can smell it before you see it, a sweet grass meadow on a summer day. The scent flickers on the breeze, you sniff like a dog on a scent, and then it's gone, replaced by a boggy tang of wet ground. And then it's back, the sweet vanilla fragrance, beckoning.
>
> (Kimmerer 2013:156)

Sample excerpt from an introduction to a research paper:

> At present only remnants of traditionally managed grassland biotopes, characterized by high biodiversity and a considerable conservation value (Kull & Zobel 1991; Garcia 1992) are found in Europe. Many characteristic species for these habitats are decreasing or threatened (Bastian & Bernhardt 1993).
>
> (Losvik 2007:239)

Upon reading the two, students take a while to realize that the recounting of knowledge from sources in the piece of scholastic writing by the Swedish botanist Losvik is contrasted with sensory input from a naturalist in the milieu of the plant, Kimmerer, wearing her Potawatomi hat. That is, students are so conditioned to only expect Losvik-type style, that it takes them a moment to realize that the sensory statements of Kimmerer are noteworthy and built on generations of empirical observations. Usually, a great discussion ensues on whether the two modes of knowledge are comparable and complementary or not, and under which circumstances. Specifically, we consider if it is fair game to use sensory input such as the smell of approaching sweet grass as an introduction rather than providing a summary of scholastic sources on the subject matter.

The second set of short excerpts that leads to a marvelous discussion about clashing worldviews is the section of references from the two authors. Losvik lists her peer reviewed journal entries. Kimmerer lists sweet grass itself, her animal spirit, her collaborator student, and the ancestors.

> References
> Bastian, O. Bernhardt, A. 1993. Anthropogenic landscape changes in Central Europe and the role of bioindication. Landscape Ecology. 8: 139–151.
> (Losvik 2007:247)

> References
> Wiingahsk, Buffalo, Lena, the Ancestors.
> (Kimmerer 2013:166)

We ponder questions such as how and with what authority do we get to include sources of knowledge in the list of references? What assumptions do we have to share to justify the mention of sweet grass itself as a source of reference? Conversely, what assumptions do we have to make to exclude it?

My agenda is to show the contrast between the two worlds through choices in discourse and language. Whatever the students conclude for themselves, they at least have an encounter with an alternative worldview.

3 Exploring the place

Syllabi, as we have established, represent the institution. Institutions are largely outposts of colonizer knowledge, yet they are in geographical locations dotted with places of significance to Indigenous populations. Acknowledging these places and working their presence into the syllabi grounds the course materials and makes the Indigenous reality tangible for the students.

In the case of the University of Rochester, we address the fact that the campus we are on has been built on Haudenosaunee land. Depending on the course content and the objectives of the course, points of convergence between the course content and the recently built Seneca cultural center are found. If we are lucky enough to have money for the fieldtrip, we make the 20-minute journey to honor the Seneca heritage. For many, it is the first and only encounter with Indigenous culture in the context of their undergraduate studies.

If the course is on advertising, an introduction to Seneca culture contrasts with the chintzy imagery of the "noble Indian" that still permeates marketing ploys. The carefully curated and narrated exhibits contradict, for example, the repeated violations of Indigenous attire by brands like *Victoria's Secret* or the appropriation of names by brands like *Jeep*.

If the course is on linguistics, we use an immersive experience into the intricacies of Seneca grammar through, for example, the ethnobotany trail constructed right outside the center. Here, a descriptive breakdown of plant names dovetails with detailed morphosemantic analysis of the words that identify the plants.

If the course is on writing, the possibilities are endless as the students come from different majors and chose to explore their own topics, ranging from engineers delving into the intricacies of constructing a Haudenosaunee longhouse to English majors attempting a comparative analysis of Western versus Seneca creation stories.

Repeated and consistent efforts to engage students with the local Indigenous heritage brings the historic and cultural footprint of the Indigenous community into academic discourse, to the here and now. It brings forward the vitality of Indigenous tradition.

4 Taking the time

In the previous section, I have illustrated the content as well as the means to ground the course materials within local Indigenous contexts. Last but

not least, time and timing are significant. An infusion of issues related to (de)colonization should seep through the topics and schedule outlined in a course syllabus. The assumption is that the majority of high school curricula encountered by students had either no or minimal authentic Indigenous thought. "Repetitio est mater studiorum" ("Repetition is the mother of learning"), says the Latin proverb. Therefore, we need to counter the repeated exposure to colonial curriculum with repeated consideration of Indigenous materials, or else we make no dent in the default colonial bias. Rather than devoting a single lecture to one specific topic, the effective way to absorb Indigenous thought would be to create a series of opportunities to re-examine the same materials throughout the course. In my practice, I provide at least three chances for engagement, which essentially results in a close reading of the text or deeper immersion in the media. In what follows, I walk the reader through one sample.

Take, for example, a writing course whose subject matter is Indigenous thought. Media and texts are compiled to introduce students to samples of Indigenous work in the arts and sciences. We start with a pre-writing module where we have a first take on the materials through classroom discussions guided by the students, which takes up about three classes. It is meant to be food for thought, a gentle encounter with the different worldview. A few weeks after the first encounter, we revisit the same compilation of materials with a different lens: we examine how Indigenous authors construct their arguments and provide evidence. This takes about two class periods. The third time we engage with the materials is to consider rhetorical choices in discourse. This takes about two class periods but might stretch out depending on individual needs, as individual instructor-student conferences occur at this time in the course. Thus, the same materials are scrutinized at least thrice, with a deepening understanding and attention to detail, deploying a variety of analytical tools. The result is intimate knowledge of a sliver of Indigenous thought. The hope is that the planted seed takes root, and the students retain at least some curiosity to explore further.

5 The syllabus is the locus of a clash in worldviews

We argued that the syllabus is where the dismantling of the pervasive colonial legacy is set off. We started with introspection of our own bias followed by inspection of the bias evident in the legitimized systems of knowledge, such as the organizing principles of libraries. Next, we illustrated how Indigenous thought can be effectively contrasted with

colonial inertia. Specifically, we advocated for transparent design. Combined with tools from the Critical Language Awareness framework, transparent design helps us craft syllabi and assignments with explicit intent and poignant discourse choices. Imbuing syllabi with locally significant geographical and cultural features makes Indigenous heritage come alive to the students. Giving students the time to re-examine materials through shifting lenses across several weeks ensures intimate knowledge. Thus, we showed that in an academic environment, the syllabus is "where you begin telling someone their world is not the only one", to steal the line from Lee Maracle.

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