

## Decolonizing Librarians' Teaching Practice: In Search of a Process and a Pathway

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### Article abstract

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# Decolonizing Librarians' Teaching Practice: In Search of a Process and a Pathway

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## ABSTRACT

*Many educators across post-secondary institutions are learning about their colonial histories and the need to decolonize curriculum, learning materials, and teaching practice described in the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Calls to Action (2015). This qualitative study explored the meaning of decolonizing with a group of ten instruction librarians at a mid-sized Canadian institution. The project was conducted in the form of a learning program to offer the predominantly white settler librarian participants a chance to explore these topics. It provided an opportunity to document a learning process and a pathway to initiate change. A five-month learning program uncovered participant questions and interpretations of decolonizing drawing on transcripts of individual learning journals and a focus group as the data set. The program inspired a community of practice enabling the learning and unlearning essential to decolonizing. We report, from the perspective of two white settler librarians, on the meaning of decolonizing as an ongoing process that enables awareness of colonization, personal identity, and positionality and includes strategies librarians can use on the path to decolonizing teaching, collections, and spaces. Participant self-awareness surfaced a critical librarianship mindset where information is understood as a product shaped by cultural, historical, social, and political forces, and where we acknowledge that academic libraries and their information sources and systems are not neutral and empower specific voices.*

**Keywords:** *community of practice · decolonizing · information literacy · learning program · positionality*

## RÉSUMÉ

*De nombreuses.eux éducatrices.teurs des établissements post-secondaires en apprennent davantage sur leur histoire coloniale et sur la nécessité de décoloniser les programmes d'études, le*

*matériel d'apprentissage et les pratiques d'enseignement décrit dans la Commission de vérité et réconciliation du Canada: Appels à l'action (2015). Cette étude qualitative a exploré le sens de la décolonisation avec un groupe de dix bibliothécaires d'instruction dans une institution canadienne de taille moyenne. Le projet a été mené sous la forme d'un programme d'apprentissage pour offrir aux bibliothécaires participant.e.s - en majorité des colons blanc.he.s - une chance d'explorer ces sujets. Il a fourni l'occasion de documenter un processus d'apprentissage et une voie pour initier le changement. Un programme d'apprentissage de cinq mois a permis de découvrir les questions et les interprétations des participant.e.s sur la décolonisation en s'appuyant sur les transcriptions de cahiers d'apprentissage individuelles et d'un groupe de discussion comme ensemble de données. Le programme a inspiré une communauté de pratique permettant l'apprentissage et le désapprentissage essentiels à la décolonisation. Nous rapportons, du point de vue de deux bibliothécaires colons blancs, le sens de la décolonisation en tant que processus continu qui permet de prendre conscience de la colonisation, de l'identité individuelle et de la positionnalité et qui inclut des stratégies que les bibliothécaires peuvent utiliser sur le chemin de la décolonisation de l'enseignement, des collections et des espaces. La conscience de soi des participant.e.s a fait émerger un état d'esprit critique de la bibliothéconomie où l'information est entendue comme un produit façonné par des forces culturelles, historiques, sociales et politiques, et où nous reconnaissons que les bibliothèques universitaires et leurs sources et systèmes d'information ne sont pas neutres et habilitent des voix spécifiques.*

*Mots-clés: communauté de pratique · décolonisation · maîtrise de l'information · programme d'apprentissage · positionnalité*

**T**HIS study was initiated by two white settler librarians to enable a group of librarians of predominantly similar backgrounds to move towards decolonizing their teaching using a community of practice. Conversations on individual positionality and knowledge of educational colonization in Canada emanated from discussions with educational developers in the Centre for Teaching and Learning, including conversations with an Indigenous colleague leading Indigenous pedagogies and ways of knowing. In the library, an inclusive collections group began identifying options to engage marginalized and equity-seeking groups to help develop our knowledge, to inform how best to move forward with developing and promoting collections, and to cultivate partnerships. In interrogating our own positionality, the researchers began to unpack the colonial roots of the Canadian academic library and the many ways that we two individuals are entrenched in a Eurocentric library system and contribute to the continuation of colonial structures, collections, and information privilege.

Higher education in Canada perpetuates racism across university culture from recruitment to reward systems, curriculum content, pedagogies, research approaches, and institutional policies. Abawi further explains that, “The dominance

of white men occupying the majority of tenured faculty positions in Canadian institutions thus marginalizes scholarly contributions and epistemologies from racialized and Indigenous perspectives” (Abawi 2018, 85). Academic librarians function within this hegemony and reflect a culture of whiteness. Canadian librarianship, as reflected in the most current census data, is also dominated by white librarians: 89% of the 9,570 Canadian librarians are white (Statistics Canada 2016). Broadly speaking, American Indians and Alaska Natives represent 1% of the US labour force (Bureau of Labor Statistics 2020). The Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) *Canadian Library Human Resources Study* reported that only 1% of Canadian librarians, other professionals or support staff are Indigenous (2015, 13).

The researchers acknowledge that the study took place at an institution that has a long history of white colonialism. It is situated in a city that was developed on Indigenous land in the 1600s, and where the university was established in 1841. We are working on the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples. Anishinaabe culture is centred on teachings from the land and its importance to physical and spiritual well-being (Ineese-Nash 2021). The land is part of the totality of interdependent beings that encompasses everything in the natural world. Haudenosaunee identity is also interconnected with land, not as a resource for exploitation, but in a holistic and reciprocal relationship calling for stewardship and protection (Hill 2017). The city population remains predominantly white and white settler perspectives and traditions are the norm. The university population is gradually changing and 3% of students are Indigenous and 25.7% from a visible minority (Queen’s 2020).

Given this context, the researchers decided to formally invite other librarians to become study participants who would engage in learning about decolonizing together. Our goal is to work towards allyship through self-learning and re-centering Indigenous thinking. To build a space of care and connection among the study group, researchers joined the learning program as participants rather than separating themselves as discrete onlookers. A formal learning program was used to initiate the community and to provide a structure for its development (Appendix). The two researchers understand the outcomes of this study in terms of both a process and a pathway. The process is our documented learning program and how it transformed our thinking. The pathway is a collation of participant ideas for decolonizing our teaching.

We addressed three research questions:

- What is the meaning of decolonizing in the context of the library?
- What strategies can librarians use in decolonizing their teaching?

- How does a learning program help to decolonize teaching?

## Literature Review

This paper is grounded in two definitions of decolonizing. Linda Tuhiwai Smith's concept of decolonization, originating from the Maori context (New Zealand), is a process of first becoming aware of Indigenous history, perspectives, and interests and acknowledging that Indigenous world views are not subordinate (2012). In seeking out Indigenous knowledge as documented by Indigenous writers, decolonization involves understanding Indigenous approaches to research and writing and the theoretical underpinnings of Indigenous scholars and not judging them against existing conformist models. Marie Battiste's work in *Decolonizing Education* describes the process as "... a commitment to both unlearn and learn — to unlearn racism and superiority in all its manifestations, while examining our own social constructions in our judgements and learn new ways of knowing, valuing others, accepting diversity, and making equity and inclusion foundations for all learners" (Battiste 2013, 166). Her work describes the impact of colonial Canada on Indigenous peoples and the culture that resulted from repression of language. Educators need to learn about this history to help them confront their own racism and colonial superiority and work to include Indigenous worldviews in all aspects of education. The return of Indigenous lands and ways of life is central to the definition of decolonizing by Tuck and Yang (2012).

Our journey is built on McGloin's definition of a critical ally (McGloin 2016, 841). The researchers take responsibility by openly acknowledging our power and privilege to challenge the systems of oppression from which our own privilege originates. We are engaging in a continuous process of unlearning and relearning to understand the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada and to apply that knowledge to our own positionality and approaches to teaching and learning. Allies must also be willing to act, in our own personal spheres of existence and in our supports for Indigenous peoples (Brown and Ostrove 2013, 2212). We also acknowledge the disparate space where Indigenous and Western knowledge systems collide, described by Nakata as the "cultural interface" (2007, 9-10). This interface conceptualizes how settler understanding of Indigenous knowledge is acquired and filtered through Western interpretations and structures, and as such, it is knowledge that has been separated from its original source and meaning.

We also acknowledge that it is our work to understand decolonizing and to not place a burden on Indigenous colleagues to have them lead us in this endeavor. The burden placed on Indigenous scholars, as described by Nicola Andrews (2018, 186-187) is far reaching and ranges from the effort needed to independently explore their own heritage within a prescribed curriculum; lack of funding, mentorship, and

ongoing career support; demanding scholarship obligations; to the requirement to participate in institutional activities and committees in order to visibly represent and endorse diversity initiatives. McGloin (2016, 842) also notes that we cannot call upon Indigenous colleagues to help us unlearn our own biases and the ways in which we contribute to Indigenous oppression. A prerequisite to becoming an ally in supporting decolonizing is our own independent learning about Indigenous history and ways of knowing as a starting point.

In the US and Canada many library efforts supporting allyship, diversity, equity, and inclusion target concrete initiatives such as scholarships, hiring, or changing subject headings. The *Protocols for Libraries, Archives and Information Services* by the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library, Information and Resource Network (ATSILIRN) are notable in their comprehensive approach to allyship (2012). They outline twelve parameters of service including governance, content, intellectual property, classification, local Indigenous issues, sacred materials, the digital environment, and more. In 2020, the American Library Association (ALA 2020) acknowledged “its role in upholding unjust systems of racism and discrimination against Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) within the association and the profession.” In our own searching, we observed that library websites and associations often refer to external allyship resources, for example *Groundwork for Change*, created by non-Indigenous librarian Monique Woroniak, and *Ally Bill of Responsibilities* by Lynn Gehl (Algonquin Anishinaabe-kwe).

The Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA) outlines decolonizing approaches for library spaces, access, classification, and protection of Indigenous knowledges. The first step is self-education. The CFLA report notes that libraries should offer training for all staff to ensure awareness of the history of colonization in Canada (CFLA 2017). Blair and Wong (2017) also suggest that it is the job of library staff to educate themselves to move toward allyship with Indigenous peoples. This learning includes recognition that library collections are built on colonial traditions and include historically biased works on Indigenous people which reinforce institutionalized racism. While addressing naming conventions in library catalogs is a start, discussions around the foundations of library collections and how they are built must be part of the conversation with researchers. Instruction should also include how to identify Indigenous authors and publishers, how to locate alternate sources that capture Indigenous ideas such as oral histories, and how to find contemporary and contextual Indigenous voices, epistemologies, and research methods (Blair and Wong 2017).

Academic libraries in Canada take various approaches to learning about decolonizing. Many have established committees specific to developing inclusive

collections, which includes representation of Indigenous scholarship and perspectives. Some defer to workshops and guides provided by learning centres external to the library. For example, the University of British Columbia created a professional learning series that orients different campus groups to decolonizing and Indigenizing from teaching, learning, research, and service perspectives (Cull et al. 2018). The college library sector in Ontario developed a faculty toolkit with resources on Indigenous inclusion in their Learning Portal (Ontario College Libraries 2020). The move towards decolonizing libraries relies mostly on self-education through reading prepared guides, attending workshops, with a focus on library collections.

Nevertheless, there is a need for more in-house education on decolonizing to trigger action. For example, a study by Schachter (2018) captured critical information literacy perspectives from librarians across post-secondary institutions in British Columbia. Her findings revealed the desire to bring a decolonizing lens to librarianship in the form of Indigenization, referring to development of Indigenous collections and the instruction around that content. Her work highlights the need to situate Indigenous information within its historical and cultural context and reflect on how libraries fit into that context. Similarly, Langille (2018) raised the issue of decolonizing library instruction at a recent Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians' conference, emphasizing the need to move away from one-shot sessions and introduce the role of information in shifting students' critical consciousness.

In terms of library services, Edwards (2019) advocates for a holistic approach that acknowledges the oppressive role that libraries have played in Canadian history through their association with colonial institutions. She recommends creating partnerships with Indigenous groups across campus to develop respectful connections with Indigenous students and scholars. Another suggestion is to bring Indigenous culture into the library, such as oral storytelling and Indigenous-led events. Holistic perspectives also apply to teaching approaches. Lee (2008) describes how, as a librarian of Cree and Mohawk ancestry, she blends both Indigenous learning culture and research process in her teaching practice. She remarks that storytelling, sharing information about your background, use of Indigenous language, and humour are ways in which to reflect Indigenous worldviews.

Academic libraries around the world are rethinking how to engage with Indigenous populations and move towards decolonizing services and collections. Indigenous librarianship aims to identify and collate culturally relevant materials and services that are designed in collaboration with Indigenous peoples and rooted within Indigenous ways of knowing and local community practice (Burns et al. 2014). Komeiji et al. (2021) describe how they are serving local Hawaiian communities

by grounding Hawaiian librarianship in traditional values and practices. They offer a model that does not build on existing Western epistemology but situates the information landscape within ‘āina (“the land and that which feeds”) meaning “the literal, physical, and spiritual foundation and catalyst of knowledge” (331). This model is decolonizing libraries by changing resource descriptions, attribution, acknowledgement, methods of preservation, and material formats so they reflect and benefit the local community. It follows the work of Matsuda et al. (2017) which describes how Western classification systems marginalize Indigenous peoples through their lack of acknowledgement of Indigenous nations, inaccuracies, omissions, exclusion of Indigenous language, and placement within the context of Indigenous ways of knowing.

In his review of university libraries serving Indigenous populations in Australia (Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders) and New Zealand (Māori), Lilley (2019) assessed websites on six factors that demonstrate inclusion of Indigenous perspectives, resources, and languages. He makes the point that first impressions are important in visibly reflecting Indigenous cultures and that there remains considerable scope for improvement. Some of these libraries, such as James Cook University, are publicly displaying a reconciliation action plan and statement of strategic intent (Mamtora et al. 2021). Wiebe and Rathi (2020) similarly completed a scan of 92 library association websites from Canada, the United States, Australia, and New Zealand. Findings revealed that some associations include formal policies and statements outlining their commitment and actions towards reconciliation and decolonization while others list only events and initiatives. While U.S. library associations are not as explicit in formal statements, some libraries outline specific actions, such as those from the University of California, Berkeley (Garrett et al. 2019). The working group makes ten recommendations including formal acknowledge of historical trauma, respect and support for the sovereignty of tribal nations, and the need to respect different approaches to information curation.

## **Theoretical Framework**

The theoretical framework of the teaching element of this study rests upon two learning theories: community of practice and transformative learning through critical self-reflection. A community of practice is defined as a group of individuals who come together to learn, share, and develop relationships (Wenger et al. 2002). The key element is social interaction which develops a sense of connectedness and belonging that motivates learning and sharing. In our context, creation of trust within the group was essential to enabling open and honest discussion. Group interactions consisted of conversations alongside participation in shared activities.



These forms of learning are synergistic and develop commitment to the group itself, shared competence, and awareness of purpose (Wenger 1998). Given our need to learn about decolonization in a way that encouraged participation and confidence over time, the community of practice made sense as a learning venue.

Critical self-reflection is the process of uncovering innate biases and assumptions and how these underpin thoughts and actions (Mezirow 2006). It is one of the key abilities that enables a shift in perspective and a new learning orientation. Mezirow defined this shift as transformative learning. “Transformative learning is learning that transforms problematic frames of reference—sets of fixed assumptions and expectations (habits of mind, meaning perspectives, mindsets)—to make them more inclusive, discriminating, open, reflective, and emotionally able to change” (Mezirow 2003, 58). To enable critical self-reflection and a shift in thinking and action related to decolonization, our research approach drew on Brookfield’s (1998) synergistic four reflective lenses: (1) autobiographical, (2) students’ eyes, (3) colleagues’ experiences, and (4) theoretical literature. Our experience comprises personal learning journals, student feedback (one Indigenous student), discussion with colleagues, and shared readings. This combination offered opportunities to reflect on feelings, questions, and underlying assumptions about ourselves as teachers and how the learning group perceive information literacy in the context of decolonization.

## Research Methodology

### *Research Approach*

This study was conceptualized within a campus focused on decolonizing teaching, learning, and research (Queen’s University Task Force 2017). Our goal was to examine how the library continues to reinforce colonization and how that stance might be shifted, specifically in teaching the research process. Our approach is shaped by Indigenous research paradigms which are underpinned by relationality, meaning the connectedness between people, culture, and the natural and spiritual world (Walker 2015; Wilson 2001). As two settler researchers, we have limited lived experience of relationality beyond our connections with people. These interpersonal connections built a foundation of collaboration, reciprocity, and mutuality where shared feelings and exchange of ideas empowered us collectively. The concept of reciprocity is a core Indigenous value that connects the community in relationship and well-being through mutual sharing and giving (Lee 2001).

In the study we adopt a relational approach by joining as participants rather than separating ourselves as discrete onlookers. Systematic racism is often perpetuated by well-intending white people who believe they are morally good, and therefore

refuse to engage with the possibility of being complicit (Applebaum 2010). According to the “white complicity claim,” failure to recognize our white privilege reinforces systematic racism (Applebaum 2010). The community of practice functioned as a space to admit our complicity, take responsibility, and to act.

We shared in the experiences, writings, and discussions of our learning group to co-construct knowledge. We shared our research data for group analysis and feedback during the focus group to better understand how we can apply it in our workplace. We sought to build respectful and trusting relationships in our collaborative learning process and within the community of learners and researchers that developed.

### ***Research Method***

This is a qualitative case study with data collected from written participant journals maintained over five months of a learning program and a closing focus group (Appendix). Following approval by the university’s ethics board, all 22 subject librarians were invited to join the study via the library’s internal listserv. Eight subject librarians consented to participate. Their disciplinary affiliations represented the social sciences, humanities, arts, law, business, education, engineering, and the sciences. In addition, the two researchers leading the study, maintained learning journals and actively joined in the community as participant observers. This enabled them to build rapport and trust, and to normalize and foster open communication among members (Guest et al. 2013). Their writing is included in the analysis of learning journals.

The reflective journals provided a source of narrative research (Connelly and Clandinin 2016) and are a common method for documenting personal insights on professional practice over time (Bashan and Holsblat 2017). The journals offered an unintrusive means to collect thoughts and feelings and involved responding to researcher questions as well as recording open observations and questions, thereby enabling critical self-reflection. Each participant received a journal, and the group discussed its purpose, how the information would inform the study, and who would have access to it. The journal was a space for recording individual reflections, ideas, and questions but also a place to respond to specific researcher questions (Appendix). Free writing was encouraged during and after each learning session. Consent was given by all participants to analyze and share the anonymized contents of individual journals.

Learning program participants completed journal reflections over six events (Appendix):

- Discussion of readings on decolonizing (two sessions)
- Discussions with faculty teaching Indigenous topics (two sessions)
- Critical analysis of one of their information literacy sessions
- Focus group to share and discuss findings

## Data Analysis

The journals and focus group were transcribed using voice to text dictation in Microsoft Word online. Before the coding process began, we returned to our research questions to align and focus our reading. Journals included a mix of full and partial sentences, keywords, and point-form notes. Two transcripts were read independently, and hand coded by both researchers to compare and negotiate interpretations. The two primary investigator journals were coded by each other. NVivo qualitative data analysis software was used to collaboratively code all transcripts.

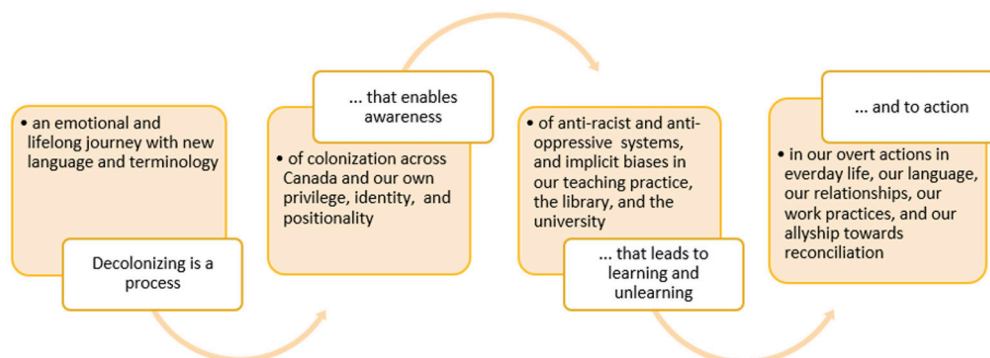
Thematic analysis employed inductive coding (Corbin and Strauss 2015) which uses a bottom-up approach to interpret data and construct emergent themes. Themes were established by reading and re-reading to uncover connections and relationships. This is the constant comparison method defined by Glaser and Strauss (1970) and it was used to establish grounded theory, that is, theory that is grounded in the data itself. Three iterations of coding enabled immersion in the data and led to emergent code categories and themes. Coding was also completed by event to capture changes over the duration of the program. Diagrams of coding themes were constructed to visualize overarching themes and their relationships and to share data with participants during the focus group (Figures 1 and 2).

## Findings

The journals expressed genuine feelings, stated troubling observations, and shared specific experiences. Findings are aligned to research questions and combine quotations from learning journals and the focus group. Within the defined set of ten participants, learning journals are identified by LJP# and focus group participants with FGP#. Numbers were assigned randomly and LJP1 is not the same individual as FGP1.

### *Research Question 1: What is the meaning of decolonizing in the context of the library?*

Key themes outlining features of decolonizing arose over the duration of the learning program and the culminating focus group and are presented in Figure 1.



**FIGURE 1** This graphic presents the key themes that describe decolonizing as extracted from participant data. The arrows indicate the iterative nature of an ongoing process where attitudes and behaviours change slowly over time as learning continues.

Evidence supporting each of these themes using participant comments follows.

*Theme one: Decolonizing is a process*

The first theme participants identified is that decolonizing is a continuing process throughout a lifetime: “Decolonization isn’t something you do once and then you’re done [LJP4]; “It’s an ongoing process” [LJP5, LJP7]; “Decolonization is an uncomfortable unsettling process that never ends” [LJP10]. It was also acknowledged that the process takes time and learning: “Sometimes you take small steps” [LJP6]; “Allyship is a process, not an identity” [LJP9].

The language of decolonizing includes unfamiliar language that needed ongoing clarification: “Terminology and language is something everyone wrestles with. I have actually incorporated this [decolonizing] into more words and phrases to capture a concept” [LJP6]. The group readings drew attention to terminology and how it is used by different groups: “ ‘Indigenize’ versus ‘decolonize’. The former would seem to benefit the settler by informing an increasing knowledge of Indigenous ways of knowing, rather than the latter which would help restore Indigenous lands and rights” [LJP9]. “It was helpful to understand the difference between Indigenizing and decolonizing” [LJP7]. One participant quoted Tuck and Yang (2012) [LJP8] to re-centre the meaning of decolonizing from an Indigenous viewpoint. It is about reclaiming Indigenous land and a return to Indigenous culture and not a metaphor for the change settlers are willing to make. “The casual inaccurate and over-use of the

term decolonization devalues it. ... What is “settler guilt”? Why call non-Indigenous population “settlers?” [LJP5].

The decolonizing process prompts unsettling and shifting emotions that repeat over time. Emotions ranged from feeling overwhelmed, uncertain, frustrated, and interested: “It’s distressing with this topic because we don’t know where we stand” [LJP7]; “It feels daunting and intimidating” [LJP3]; “I still have more questions than answers” [LJP9]. Questioning was prominent throughout all sessions: “What exactly does decolonization mean?” [LJP5]; “How would you proceed in your own class and what do we actually do to talk about inclusive authorities?” [LJP7]; “I need to question and reformulate my materials” [LJP6]; “Should our efforts be in organizing knowledge, not acquiring it?” [LJP5].

*Theme two: Decolonizing is a process of awareness*

The second theme that was noted is that decolonizing is a process intended to identify and stop the continuation of colonization. Participants gave voice to their growing awareness of the library as a colonizing agency. “Libraries as institutions are rooted in a colonial past” [LJP4]. “Overall, we can say that the library structure shapes the way we think about knowledge and that we are enculturated into a specific perspective” [LJP7]. “The opening sentence really struck me when I read libraries are complicit in supporting constructions of knowledge that perpetuate existing power structures and how they may have the potential to serve as a site of resistance and change” [LJP8]. “Libraries, archives, museums reflect colonial values, [and have a] legacy to “civilize”” [LJP9]. “I learned that the concept of neutrality is really misleading. Especially when neutrality really means western-centric doctrines” [LJP3]. The university was also criticized for its continuing role in colonization: “Much needs to be done on the part of the university to address the ignorance and misinformation perpetuated by past scholarship” [LJP1].

The data revealed a growing awareness of individual identity: “[I’m] wrestling with my own identity as librarian, as a white person here. How much and how am I implicated?” [LJP2]. “When should I step back and clear the way for more appropriate voices? We are largely white women” [LJP3]. “I wouldn’t even begin to know what I would want to say about my settler background. I don’t know it” [FGP6]. “Where do I fit? We have to think of our own identity and experience because that’s what gives us our current viewpoint. We each have our own voice and we aren’t really neutral. Libraries think they are equalizing but we are complicit” [LJP7]. The idea of positionality arose in a discussion about the orientation of library resource guides [LJP2] and how we mentally situate the academic library: “The library is one source of information ... but being humble about what it’s not and can never be ... how much

is the library ... simply colonial and is imperialist in certain ways and is western” [FGP2].

*Theme three: Decolonizing is a process that involves learning and unlearning*

The data revealed the ongoing need for learning and unlearning in relation to personal perspectives, the library and institution, and the history of our country. Unlearning for Euro-centric Canadians is defined as a process of “challenging their conscious and subconscious notions of meritocracy and superiority learned in life with sometimes well-intentioned but biased parents, grandparents, media, community, school texts and discussions and how privilege is constructed and maintained in a racist society” (Battiste 2013, 70). For educators, it requires unlearning “racism and superiority in all its manifestations, while examining our own social constructions in our judgements and learn new ways of knowing, valuing others, accepting diversity, and making equity and inclusion foundations for all learners” (Battiste 2013, 166).

Nathan and Perreault (2018, 76) refer to unlearning as “questioning and potentially rejecting what has been learned in the past when understandings are found to be incorrect, with the goal of not perpetuating problematic and harmful understandings (e.g., racial, gender-based, cultural bias, or stereotypes).”

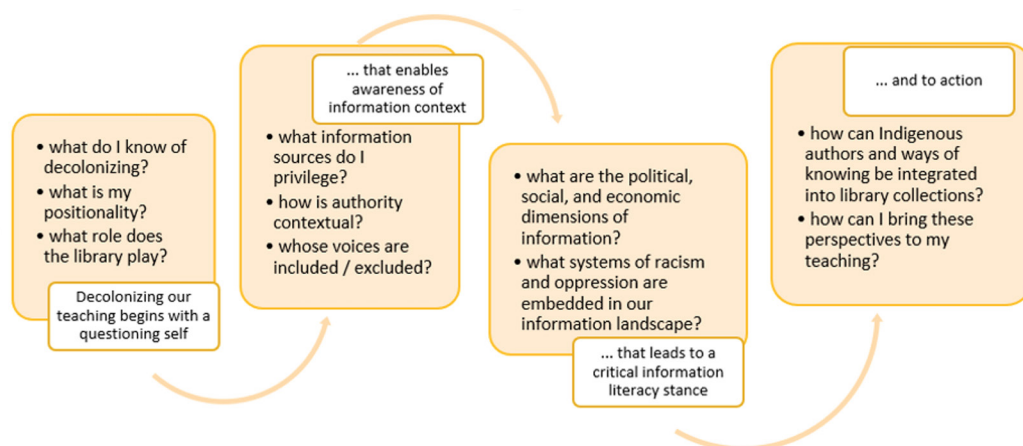
“Indigenous peoples are saying it isn't about you helping us, it's about you and your unlearning process” [LJP7]. “Decolonizing language is adamant, blunt, and harsh. There are a number of assumptions, truths embedded in the issue. I want to understand and unpack this further. I need to at least question my assumptions [and] approach to information literacy, actively resist, and rethink my slides and methods. Reach for decolonization and up with Indigenization” [LJP6]. “I've just become paralyzed in a way. Because everything that we've talked about has made me think about things that I need to learn more about. Now I'm so conscious of everything I say that I'm thinking – is that the right thing to say” [FGP3].

Ways in which the library functions as a colonizing force were identified: “Citation politics. The library needs to ensure that it is building a diverse collection” [LJP1]. “Stop positioning Indigenous knowledge as other” [LJP8]. Our “Authorities [are] currently based on western systems of knowledge. Authorities are not neutral - but are culturally specific” [LJP8]. Our databases perpetuate non-findability and consequent exclusion of voices and perspectives through “structural biases of schemes of knowledge organization and information retrieval” [LJP8] and by “... hiding the bias and inequalities inherent in the system” [LJP4]. There was acknowledgement that our learning “requires addressing structural biases (institutional for example), recreating an Indigenous worldview, conversation,

unlearning” [LJP9]. “Residential schools [and] other colonial policies and actions that stripped Indigenous peoples of their lands and rights must be addressed in university courses” [LJP1].

**Research Question 2: What strategies can librarians use in decolonizing their teaching?**

Participants raised questions about what the decolonizing process looks like in practice when they connect students to resources and research pathways. These questions are collated into four central themes in Figure 2 to capture a pathway leading to decolonized teaching, bring positionality to teaching, discuss information context and interpretations of authority, adopt a critical information literacy stance, and Integrate Indigenous perspectives.



**FIGURE 2** This graphic presents key ideas on how teaching can be decolonized as captured from participants. The arrows indicate the iterative nature of an ongoing process where attitudes and behaviours change slowly over time as learning continues.

Evidence supporting each theme in the pathway towards change in teaching approaches follows.

*Theme one: The pathway to decolonizing teaching begins with positionality*

One faculty member who teaches Indigenous topics talked about positionality, referring to the experiences that have contributed to our perspectives on Indigenous peoples: “She prefers to send them [students] into the community to really experience what it’s like and as a way to reflect on who they are when they have that contact” [LJP3]. The same faculty member stated that her first reflex is to not send her

students to the library because it holds “a lot of problematic stuff.” This surprised our librarians and prompted continued discussion on the library as colonial institution and our role in perpetuating it. One participant noted that going forward, she would “actively question what I do ... when putting together PowerPoint slides and building LibGuides” [LJP6]. It was acknowledged that one of the overall barriers to Indigenous students is “dominant knowledge organization structures that dispossess Indigenous peoples of their lands, histories, memories and knowledge and silences their voice” [LJP9]. “We have to acknowledge that we are part of the system. We see that the library has an information structure, and we use that to demonstrate how to find information and thereby perpetuate use of enemy language” [LJP7]. We need to “point out to students the biases and prejudices inherent in our finding aids and classification system and subject headings” [LJP4].

*Theme two: The pathway to decolonizing teaching involves discussion of information context and interpretations of authority*

The construct of authority was a focus throughout the program: “Professors stipulate that sources have to be scholarly peer-reviewed journals, but ... we can still introduce the concept of authority, of what that means, how it is contextual, is socially constructed. There are experts in other fields” [FGP1]. “I can also ... ask students to consider the authority of, for example what a European Explorer wrote about Indigenous people, [what] he observed versus the oral history of those peoples about their hunting fishing boundaries” [LJP2]. “An elder for example. That person is the authority in the subject” [FGP1]. One Indigenous professor questioned authority in terms of Indigenous oral histories versus databases [LJP8]. We need to ask ... “What is there? What isn't there? Then ask if there are oral histories and what can be found in databases” [LJP2].

It was suggested that we make authority a focus in every class: “Question western concepts of authority. Acknowledge there are other equally valid ways of knowing” [LJP1]. “Authority is a type of influence. It is a culturally constructed concept” [LJP8]. “It seems that we try to find out and establish what is true and that markers of authority are a shortcut way of saying this is true and can be trusted. However, this is problematic when you don't recognize a marker of authority as being valid. For example, tested traditional knowledge” [LJP5]. “Asking what makes a resource credible is useful. This simple question could introduce Indigenous ways of knowing and comparing to traditional scholarly resources” [LJP3]. “Focus more on the evaluation of sources and the meaning of authority in writing” [LJP7]. “We have to remember we are drawing on colonized sources, especially things like government documents” [LJP4].



*Theme three: The pathway to decolonizing teaching includes adopting a critical information literacy stance effects of metaphor*

Librarians made comments about the purpose of information literacy and its entrenchment within a colonial system. Comments reflect a critical information literacy stance, defined as “a way of thinking and teaching that examines the social construction and political dimensions of libraries and information, problematizing information’s production and use so that library users may think critically about such forces” (Tewell 2018). There is a “broader responsibility on the part of librarians to teach information literacy with a more critical lens” [LJP4]. “Critical information literacy can support decolonization by providing a framework for identifying privilege and power in the library, as it relates to white settler colonization” [LJP1]. “If we think about critical theory, it deals with knowledge oppression. How can a researcher apply it? We can think about colonization in terms of resources. What is critical information literacy and how is it a part of the learning system?” [LJP7]. In referring to the reading by Rosenblum (2015), it was stated that: “Rosenblum raised an interesting point regarding the criticism of contemporary models of information literacy instruction for framing information literacy as a set of discrete individual and marketable skill sets and measurable outcomes” [LJP4]. “Our teaching approach should both acknowledge the shortcomings of traditional information literacy instruction and biases of library colonial collections as well as make new spaces or space in general for other approaches and ways of knowing” [LJP3]. “Critical information literacy: dismantle colonialist values of literacy ... by challenging western authority, for example classification systems, privilege of written word, acknowledge stories and lived experiences as valid ways of knowing” [LJP9].

One participant noted specific steps to move towards critical information literacy: 1. move beyond one shot instruction; 2. recognize power structures these are probably so embedded they're hard to see; 3. prioritize the student; 4. critical pedagogical theory increases awareness. Be ethically good. Validate knowledge from “memories, oral histories, the land and lived experiences” [LJP8].

*Theme four: The pathway to decolonizing teaching includes integrating Indigenous knowledges and perspectives*

Participants commented on the need to learn about Indigenous ways of knowing and how those perspectives change the way we identify and use sources of information. “What I really need is more learning ... into “other ways of knowing”” [LJP5]. “I also like to demonstrate that Indigenous worldviews plural are not ubiquitous” [LJP3]. We need to be “acknowledging Indigenous knowledge systems and representing them on the same level as western knowledge systems” [LJP4]. There were comments on introduction of Indigenous content in teaching sessions: “I should be teaching

what materials we ... have access to and what we don't and to engage with material about Indigenous [topics] critically: who wrote it, recorded it, when, where, and for what audience" [LJP2]. "I think that's where we can push for more primary sources or people getting their information from other ways and legitimizing that form by saying ... that's valid" [FGP6]. "There are at least two First Nations universities in Canada. I'm wondering what their information literacy strategies are" [FGP1]. The group unanimously agreed that increasing Indigenous representation in libraries would be greatly beneficial: "More representation on library teams would inherently influence more diverse instruction" [LJP3]. There was consideration that libraries should not have access to certain Indigenous knowledge: "Some of the readings in our circle discussed "stealing knowledge" or using it for settlor gain and scholarship ... cultural appropriation of Indigenous ways of knowing for colonial benefit" [LJP9]. Although our sessions are short, there is a need to ensure that "space be included in the class for a range of ways of knowing and respecting information" [LJP8]. This was endorsed by one instructor who described using resources from YouTube, museums, organizations, and social media to bring Indigenous perspectives to their course.

***Research Question 3: How does a learning program help to decolonize teaching?***

Comments on the learning program were captured in the journals and concluding focus group. The program provided a trusted space for open discussion: "Part of what I really appreciated about it was that we are curious like-minded people who really wanted to be here and talk about these things" [LJP2]. Joining together as a group was a positive feature: "... finding groups that mutually learn together and are meeting people where they are is really good" [FGP2]. "A lot of learning happens not just at the individual level but at the group level. When you talk to each other you start to build knowledge as a group and you can go back to each other and continue these discussions after the formal learning is over" [FGP5]. "[We] are interacting in an authentic way even though the content is uncomfortable, and many have found the readings difficult" [LJP7]. "I think there's a certain amount of emotional processing that occurs. It's nice to have a trusted group ... and that is a very positive part of the process" [FGP4]. Discussion of readings offered a range of insights. It was a "really helpful review of the literature around decolonization versus Indigenizing" [LJP1]. "I really found it helpful to hear the researchers talk about their work" [FGP3].

The program enabled identification of individual learning gaps. "A lot of us need to learn about these resources ... what is being written about, how to use Indigenous resources, how to find them, what they look like, who sanctions them, what's available in the local community" [LJP7]. The process itself spurred various forms of self-reflection and action. One participant stated, "[I] can absolutely bring this into my

information literacy classes. The readings really helped me to self-reflect and think about the impact of colonization” [LJP1]. “It has made me more confident in being able to identify my own goal as decolonization not Indigenization” [LJP2]. “[We] need to learn more about learning [and] unlearning, but ... respect [where] our knowledge ends” [FGP2]. “This program has influenced my own information literacy practice by inspiring me to include something in even the most introductory of sessions” [LJP3]. “It helps me refocus on what is right and possible for what a non- Indigenous person like me can do” [LJP2].

## **Discussion**

This study addressed three questions: 1) What is the meaning of decolonizing in the context of the library; 2) What strategies can librarians use in decolonizing their teaching; and 3) How does a learning program help to decolonize teaching? Although our participant group was small, our learning experience was rich. The learning program gave librarians a forum to discuss how the library is supporting decolonizing, especially through our approach to teaching research skills. Discussion of the resulting data follows in relation to each to the three research questions and integrates literature that confirms or extends the findings.

### ***Meaning of Decolonizing***

Participants described decolonizing as an ongoing emotional and intellectual process involving multiple iterative phases. The initial feeling in this process was one of anxiety and questioning as gaps in learning were uncovered and acknowledged. Clarification of terminology was essential to identifying a path forward, especially to distinguish between decolonizing and Indigenizing. The former term can be superficially adopted to describe social justice issues without acknowledging the original focus on Indigenous land and life (Tuck and Yang 2012). Anderson and Christen (2019) caution that decolonizing library collections must be connected to the reclaiming of Indigenous lands, cultures, and communities in terms of correct attribution, ending wrongful appropriation, and seeking relationships with Indigenous communities to understand if, and how, materials can be shared. The latter term can be confused with decolonization and be limited to focus on inclusion of Indigenous resources in course content (Hill 2012) or in the description and scope of Indigenous collections (Edwards 2019; Laroque 2018). Readings and dialogue helped participants become aware that understanding decolonizing means understanding the process of colonization, its impact on Indigenous history, and on individual identity and positionality. Participants shifted from thinking about the library

as neutral space to recognizing that library policies maintain an image of a space restricted to scholars and scholarly works as defined within western culture.

Participant writing repeatedly mentioned that decolonizing involves a process of learning and unlearning, especially understanding the consequences of the colonizing impact of the library. Libraries have inherited traditions with regard to collections and services, and changing these approaches necessitates a shift in mindset as well as practice. A decolonizing mindset became evident in learning journals when commentary shifted from emotional self-reflection to acknowledgment of learning and unlearning to action ideas for implementation in teaching and services. These reflections mirror Tuhiwai Smith's (2012) starting point for decolonizing which begins with the study of Indigenous history and epistemological systems and acknowledgment of their inherent validity. Battiste (2013) similarly calls for examination of settler origins and their impact on the colonization of what is now called Canada as the start of a decolonizing path. Both authors indicate that awareness of this history helps confront the settler role in perpetuating its harm and forge a path towards a role as supporter and ally. Decolonizing begins with critical self-reflection (Cook 2020), is recognized as a process of learning and unlearning (Datta 2018) and includes local Indigenous communities and how our settler beliefs and biases continue to shape their history (Cull et al. 2018). Findings also confirm that the library is a part of an institutional subculture confirming other researcher remarks on the need to first address institutional attitudes, power structures, and policies before the pursuit of Indigenizing practice (George 2019; Charles 2019).

Participants identified 3 strategies for decolonizing teaching:

- I. Rethinking the information landscape

Participants identified elements that support decolonizing their teaching. Building on the need to uncover colonial practices in the library and our own positionality, librarians need to examine the characteristics of the academic information landscape. Conversations included how knowledge is produced, shared, used, and its role in reinforcing colonial ideas. Participants stated that they emphasize use of peer-reviewed scholarly sources and may not describe how primary sources and other information external to the library can be authoritative. There is a need to deconstruct the concept of authority within the scholarly information paradigm and discuss this with students. Conversations would include identifying missing voices and perspectives in academic collections and describing how to locate them, including the role of open access resources and institutional repositories and how they are tagged in the library catalogue.

## 2. Rethinking library language

Participants noted that library language is built on long-standing traditions and the researchers explored the many terms that reflect a colonial positionality. Indigenous language is absent from the catalogue and the terms reflect interpretations of Indigenous history, culture, and writing. These terms are often derogatory in that they do not capture Indigenous meaning, specificity of content, allocation to specific nations, and they do not use Indigenous language. They exclude content created by Indigenous peoples, which is often freely available on the web, and referred to in libraries as “grey literature.” This term identifies sources that are not formally published but are authored by authoritative groups and organizations, including Indigenous organizations and band councils. Use of this phrase as being “grey” imparts secondary status in comparison to scholarly sources, which are the most-recommended sources for academic research. In most research databases, the tools for isolating peer-reviewed scholarly journals are prominent thereby reducing the chance of using alternative sources.

## 3. Re-centering Indigenous knowledge

Participants felt constrained about doing more with Indigenous sources because of the limited teaching time in a standard 50-minute library workshop. However, it is possible to highlight the work of Indigenous organizations, scholars, artists, writers, local First Nation community websites, and the teachings of Elders and Knowledge Keepers in library guides. Library instruction should discuss the origins of subject classification, use of Library of Congress headings, and the consequent lack of Indigenous naming. Regarding collection building, librarians can describe the purchasing model and absence of Indigenous publishers in the predominant sourcing approach.

### *Learning Program*

The learning program does not appear to be a common approach to decolonizing the library environment. Judging from library websites, the approach of most Canadian libraries is to host Indigenous speakers, encourage self-study, compile Indigenous resources, and begin group conversations relating to collections and classification (Sloan 2018). Other authors, offer further approaches to decolonizing library instruction. The need for marketing Indigenous resources, including local events, is critical to brand the library as a decolonizing supporter (Ocholla 2020). Charles reinforces the need for development of a critical lens in the library and the need to go beyond readings and collating learning materials to examine cultural contexts (2019). Loyer and Lee suggest that decolonized approaches must respect the trauma that research experiences may cause for Indigenous students, and they encourage a

holistic information literacy approach that respects the whole person (Loyer 2017; Lee 2008). Goulet and Goulet (2014) offer an Indigenous pedagogy model based on a relational approach to learning where a culturally sensitive group identity is formed through interpersonal classroom connections.

Study findings illustrate how participant conversation and perspectives shifted over the duration of the learning program. This shift was enabled by development of a community of practice where open dialogue could take place over time. Learning journals documenting self-reflections enabled capture of this shift. Transformative learning is about making a change to one's frames of reference, referring to the ideas, feelings, and values that create lived experience (Mezirow 1997). These frames structure our habitual perceptions and responses, described by Mezirow as our habits of mind, and they can transform in response to ongoing dialogue where assumptions and points of view are critically examined. When the program began, participants shared discomfort with terminology, inherent biases and assumptions, and lack of knowledge about decolonizing. Our continuing dialogue enabled us to critique the library as a colonial institution and how it shapes thinking and actions. The largely white-settler group felt overwhelmed and paralyzed at times but ultimately, started to articulate specific actions that have led to decolonizing aspects of our teaching. The community enabled this self-critique and openness to new thinking through analysis of common experiences and biases.

### **Considerations Going Forward**

We acknowledge the limitations of our study. All but one of the participants were white women settlers, including the researchers. As such, our privilege and gender has limited the scope of our dialogue and interpretations, and we did not have Indigenous partners, save one Indigenous student intern, to guide our readings, questions, or discussion. Our study reports individual perceptions at a specific institution with a small group of librarians. Findings cannot be generalized, however, suggestions for a learning process and pathway for change to teaching may be adopted by any library. The learning program was offered to all teaching librarians (22), but participant interest may have been limited by the reading and writing requirements over several months. Journal writing may also have been censored by participants to some extent and group conversations were not recorded to encourage open sharing and risk-taking.

Future studies could offer a decolonizing learning program for all staff as part of a whole library learning initiative. Advice on the design outcomes, and resources for the program could be sought from our Centre for Teaching and Learning where an educational developer specializing in Indigenous Pedagogies and Ways of Knowing

is now available for support. As part of the program, teaching librarians could be invited to showcase the changes they have made to their practice as a result of joining the previous community of practice.

Findings have been shared with the entire library system in an open discussion forum. This program reinforced the need for educational opportunities to be built into staff work schedules to enable ongoing learning and discussion within a “brave” space (Arao and Clements 2018) where librarians can collectively and courageously confront our own colonial practice. Further opportunities to continue this work involve contributing to the *Library Action Plan to Support Anti-Racism, Diversity, Inclusion, and Indigenous Cultures*. The Action Plan focuses on library services, staff, spaces and collections, with defined library strategic objectives for 2019-20 to 2021-22. Objectives include how to decolonize collection development and stewardship, showcase diverse collections and research, and engage and support Indigenous expertise. One researcher now gives a regular Centre for Teaching and Learning workshop on *Selecting Indigenous Resources for the Classroom* in partnership with an Indigenous educational developer.

All subject librarians are integrating Indigenous resources across their online disciplinary guides and seeking new materials by Indigenous authors that reflect Indigenous knowledge systems and perspectives, especially those of the Anishinaabe and Haudenosaunee peoples, on whose lands the university is situated. Resource guides have been created to guide our learning community to materials on local and other Canadian Indigenous authors, approaches to decolonizing teaching and learning, and information on Indigenous treaties and agreements. We acknowledge that we do not address repatriation in other concrete ways, apart from financially supporting the local Tyendinaga landback initiative. On the campus front, the library built the 2022 annual undergraduate research conference, *Inquiry@Queens*, on the theme *Reaching Beyond*, to invite reflection on how we think about inquiry as a way of knowing. Underpinning these initiatives, we will ground our allyship to support decolonizing by learning about Indigenous history and ways of knowing, so we are able to understand how to bring Indigenous perspectives into our teaching and to student learners (McGloin 2009). We will also carry Nakata’s conception of the “cultural interface” in our work to reflect on the gaps between our learning and true Indigenous knowledge as it would be acquired and translated by Indigenous peoples.

The study offers one contribution to the field in its use of a community of practice as a process to better understand decolonizing and chart a path towards change in teaching approaches. Although what we learned is not new and has been addressed by other organizations (ATSILIRN 2012), it is new to us. We learned that to make systemic change, we need to question our own positionality and biases by reading,

self-reflection, and ongoing dialogue. Without an inward critique, it will be difficult to make meaningful changes in the library environment.

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## Appendix: Learning Program Outline

### Learning Program Event #1: Reading Circle

Participants were given readings and questions in advance and came to discuss them in the circle.

December 13, 2:00-3:30. Readings: blog - short essay - slides - poster

- Pateman, John. (2018, January 25). "Decolonization." *Open Shelf* blogpost.
- Rosenblum, Brian. (2015). "Decolonizing Libraries." Essay.
- Langille, Donna. (2018). "Decolonizing academic libraries critical information literacy and truth and reconciliation." Slides.
- Langille, Donna. (2018). "A call to action: Decolonizing academic libraries." *Concordia Library Research Forum*. Poster.
- Tuck, Eve, & K. Wayne Lang. (2012). "Decolonization is not a metaphor." *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 1 (1).

At the close of each of the first four sessions, participants were asked to respond to three researcher questions:

1. What new ideas did you learn from the readings/ session?
2. How do these ideas influence the way you think about information literacy development and instruction in general?
3. How could you apply this learning to your own teaching practice?

### Learning Program Event #2: Reading Circle

Participants were given readings and questions in advance and came to discuss them in the circle.

January 9, 2:00-3:30. Readings: article – dissertation & book excerpts – essay

- Watkins, A. (2017). "Teaching Inclusive Authorities: Indigenous Ways of Knowing and the Framework for Information Literacy in Native Art." In *Disciplinary Applications of Information Literacy Threshold Concepts*, edited by Samantha Godbey, Susan Beth Wainscott, and Xan Goodman.
- Hill, Elina. (2012). "A critique of the call to "Always Indigenize!"" *Peninsula: A Journal of Relational Politics* 2 (1).
- Doyle, Ann Mary. (2013). "Naming, claiming, and (re) creating: Indigenous knowledge organization at the cultural interface." PhD diss., University of British Columbia. (pp. 128-145).

- Kimmerer, Robin Wall. (2013). Learning the grammar of animacy. In *Braiding Sweetgrass: Indigenous Wisdom, Scientific Knowledge and the Teachings of Plants*.

Please respond to these questions in your learning journal:

1. What new ideas did you learn from the readings/ session?
2. How do these ideas influence the way you think about information literacy development and instruction in general?
3. How could you apply this learning to your own teaching practice?

### **Learning Program Event #3: Indigenous Research**

January 28, 2:00-3:30. Faculty undertaking Indigenous research joined the group including individuals from: Music and Drama, English, Kinesiology and Health Studies, and Geography and Planning.

During the interactive discussions, we shared the role of teaching librarians in student information literacy development, and invited faculty to respond to general questions in relation to Indigenous research by students and educators:

Questions for discussion will include:

1. What does information literacy/research look like to you and your community?
2. How can we better meet your needs in relation to information research?
3. How can we collaborate with you to develop supports for these needs?

Please respond to these questions in your learning journal:

1. What new ideas did you learn from the conversation?
2. How do these ideas influence the way you think about information literacy development and instruction in general?
3. How could you apply this learning to your own teaching practice?

### **Learning Program Event #4: Indigenous Research**

March 5, 2:00-3:30. Faculty undertaking Indigenous research joined us including individuals from: Centre for Teaching and Learning and Music Theory, English and Indigenous undergraduate student and Library Project Intern (Dene).

During the interactive discussions, we shared the role of teaching librarians in student information literacy development, and invited faculty to respond to general questions in relation to Indigenous research by students and educators:

Questions for discussion around Indigenous research:

- What does information literacy/research look like to you?
- How can we better meet your needs in relation to information research?
- How can we collaborate with you to develop supports for these needs?

Please respond to these questions in your learning journal:

4. What new ideas did you learn from the conversation?
5. How do these ideas influence the way you think about information literacy development and instruction in general?
6. How could you apply this learning to your own teaching practice?

### **Learning Program Event #5: Teaching Reflection**

Following our two reading circles and two conversations with faculty engaged in Indigenous research, we asked participants to reflect on a library session they gave in the past academic year.

In the reflection for your learning journal, please address these questions:

- a) Describe the information resources you present in terms of decolonizing perspectives. You might comment on authors and types of material that you include/exclude and strategies for evaluating information.
- b) How might you adopt more decolonized approaches with information literacy going forward?

### **Learning Program Event #6: Focus Group**

January 28, 2:00-3:30. Sharing and discussing our findings

The final focus group marked the culmination of the program and served as a means for collective analysis of the experience. Each librarian was encouraged to consult their learning journal during the meeting as a memory aid to the past sessions.

Questions driving the focus group discussion were:

- How can we decolonize our approaches to information literacy?
- What contributes to a successful learning program on decolonizing?
- How might the library move towards decolonizing its practices?