

Diversifying the Discipline in Settler-Colonial Contexts

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One of my key goals as a non-Indigenous political scientist and educator living in a settler-colonial context has been to think about and respond to the exclusion and underrepresentation of Indigenous perspectives and experiences in the discipline. Internationally, the discipline of political science has structurally excluded Indigenous students and scholars, women, people of color, and other minorities, while privileging Western epistemologies and political issues. This has a number of negative effects, including reduced diversity in students and scholars of political science; lack of analysis of policy problems affecting these groups; and inaccurate or inadequate political theories that overlook key issues affecting politics and political systems (Pateman 1989; Smith 1999; Bruyneel 2014; Simpson 2014; Ferguson 2016; Bargh 2022). By contrast, research suggests that diversifying the discipline in terms of content, teaching, and scholarship has a range of benefits. These include encouraging more diverse students to study the subject, more robust political theories and analysis, improved wellbeing for students who see themselves and their political issues represented in the field, and improved academic outcomes for a wider range of students (Dee 2005; Egalite, Kisida and Winters 2015; Simpson and Smith 2014; Moreton-Robinson 2016; Mershon and Walsh 2016).

When I first started teaching my own courses, I read widely about efforts to “decolonize the curriculum” and responded to these calls by diversifying the voices, experiences and texts on my syllabi and in my lectures. But in recent years, calls to “decolonize” the curriculum in this way have increasingly been greeted with skepticism, with some arguing that a focus on content fails to address the myriad ways that our education system privileges certain experiences, perspectives and forms of learning (Lintott and Skitolsky 2016), and others pointing out that these efforts sidestep the central question of land (Tuck and Yang 2012; Khalid et al. 2022). Calling out the often ‘hollow’ language of decolonization in an academic context, some critics have argued for more nuanced descriptions of these efforts, using words such as “diversify”, “decenter,” and “disinvest” (Appleton 2019).

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As I have learned more about the politics and practicalities of responding to disciplinary exclusion, I have looked beyond diversifying the content of my courses to changing both the form of my teaching and my approach to assessment. I have also sought opportunities to learn more in community with others, with the aim of changing disciplinary omissions and public knowledge about politics. As a non-Indigenous scholar, I seek to be attentive to the position of privilege that I occupy in the context of a settler-colonial country and how my presence in the classroom can itself be structurally problematic (Timperley 2022). There is much scholarship, for example, showing the positive effects on student engagement and achievement when students are taught by instructors of the same ethnicity (Dee 2005; Egalite, Kisida and Winters 2015). In Aotearoa New Zealand, where I teach, the absence of Indigenous and Pasifika academics has been scrutinized as a source of structural injustice, with negative effects for minority students in particular (McAllister et al. 2019; Naepi 2019).

PROMOTING INDIGENOUS ROLE MODELS WITHIN A COURSE

In an effort to better understand the needs of Indigenous students in my courses, I met with a number of former Māori students in 2018 to hear about their experiences and get a sense for what support they would like to see in our political science department and in the discipline more broadly. These students highlighted strong relationships (whanaungatanga!) as central to their desire to study political science and their progress within the subject. Connected to this, they wanted see more Māori staff and students in the department, in addition to inclusion of Māori pedagogies, emphasizing that these pedagogies are often good for all students, not just Indigenous ones. In light of what I heard, I extensively restructured my first-year New Zealand government and politics course to make it more accessible and responsive to Māori students.

One key aspect of this restructure involved creating short videos that moved some lecture content online in order to provide time to focus more on community-building and interaction within the lecture. This project not only freed me up to center relationships in my lectures, but it allowed me to build deeper relationships with and offer further academic development to the three former students who co-created the videos with me. A key feature of our *kōrero* (discussion) was that visibility of Māori leaders and mentors was critical for Māori student success, so we intentionally positioned them as experts and role models in the subject. While my presence as a non-Indigenous scholar in the classroom can be problematic, these videos helped me share the role of expert with more diverse voices and perspectives, and the

co-design process resulted in the videos being responsive to Māori students' needs. Moreover, while designed with Indigenous students in mind, these videos were valuable for all students, enabling those with diverse needs to access information in visual as well as written form. Student feedback to these videos has been overwhelming positive, and they have proven to be particularly valuable in the Covid-era, with classes moving between online and in-person modes.

PROMOTING INDIGENOUS CONTENT WITHIN AND BEYOND A COURSE

In my upper-level classes, I encourage undergraduate students to see themselves as transitioning from passive "consumers" of information to proactive contributors to the discipline (Timperley, Doudney and Shasha 2022). For example, in my final-year New Zealand politics course, students share original research and specialized knowledge with a public audience through contributions to Wikipedia pages on New Zealand politics (Timperley 2020). This assignment generates in students an informed skepticism about the quality of content on Wikipedia and encourages them to actively address weaknesses they identify, giving them a sense of agency. In addition to developing communication and research skills, this task enabled students to make significant contributions to Wikipedia content on New Zealand politics, with a particular focus on underserved topics such as Indigenous politics.

The assignment first requires students to write a literature review identifying gaps on Wikipedia related to New Zealand politics. In completing this task, they become aware of the topics that are privileged in this public forum and consider this in relation to what they know of New Zealand political science research. After identifying information gaps on Wikipedia, students are then encouraged to address these omissions using material from their research papers to create or amend Wikipedia entries. They then write a short reflection highlighting and critically analyzing their interventions. Throughout the semester, students brainstorm their ideas and review each other's work in small groups, in addition to helping each other with technical questions and challenges. The assignment not only supports the development of higher-level research and writing skills, but also awakens students to omissions in political science content both within the discipline and in public forums. Student feedback highlights how much students appreciate having an opportunity to rectify some of these gaps.

These two interventions clearly do not "fix" the problem of Indigenous exclusion in political science teaching and scholarship, but they are small attempts to move beyond the (still important) task of diversifying what constitutes the political science canon via amending reading lists and lecture content. The pandemic has resulted in significant changes to the form of teaching and how we assess students, offering a critical juncture for wider discussions about decolonization and Indigenization. These discussions are not straightforward, especially when pursued by non-Indigenous scholars like myself, but are essential to scholars teaching in settler-colonial contexts like the United States, Canada and Aotearoa New Zealand. ■

ENDNOTES

1. <https://maoridictionary.co.nz/word/10068>

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