

VISIBLE OR INVISIBLE: SEPARATE REALITIES AMONG INNU AND WENDAT STUDENTS AT CÉGEP LIMOILOU - AN ANTHROPOLOGICAL PERSPECTIVE



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BACKGROUND

Cégep Limoilou enrolls on average about 60 Indigenous students a year. In 2016, it began offering intercultural training for teachers and other staff members.¹ In 2018, a new institutional guideline led to the hiring of a social worker with experience working with the Indigenous population and a student life animator for Indigenous students, as well as participation in an intercollegiate research project. Although we only began offering these services recently, we have been addressing contemporary Indigenous realities in our courses for far longer. Over the years, we have invited Indigenous students to get involved by raising awareness in class. We found similarities and differences in college integration strategies, especially between Innu and Wendat students.

OBJECTIVES AND APPROACH

Our objectives were to use the literature and interviews to validate the observations made in the classroom, to think about our role as teachers and allies of our Indigenous students, to fine-tune our understanding of these students' experiences and needs, and to raise awareness in the college with a view to offering services that better reflect the diversity of challenges experienced by Indigenous students. Our approach was to record our observations and discussions, to meet with Indigenous students and practitioners (at the college and elsewhere), to write a literature review and to disseminate our observations so that Eurocentric institutions can work toward achieving greater cultural safety.

IDENTITY, CULTURE AND FIRST LANGUAGE VS. COLLEGE LIFE

We observed that Innu youth live in two worlds: their Indigenous community and the Quebec City region. Their transition to CEGEP often involves a deep sense of uprootedness and a loss of identity. They come from a variety of school environments (instruction in Innu or French), and arrive at another institution oriented toward assimilation (De Crank 2008).²

Many of them don't fit in with either traditional Innu life (Audet 2012) or non-Indigenous life.

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In addition, they have their personal baggage, which colours their culture shock, their perception of the similarities and differences between them and non-Indigenous Quebecers, and their social and academic adjustment, at a time when identity renewal is becoming a watchword in Indigenous communities (Poirier 2009) and when college institutions neither know or value Innu culture. Thus, students' cultural identity is profoundly affected by uprooting, and Innu students have multiple identities.

More specifically, intercultural exchange is marked by a Eurocentric vision of academic learning, based largely on cognitive knowledge (Battiste 2013). In contrast, the Innu vision is based largely on “non-formal” learning acquired outside school, as well as on “non-structured” learning, which does not exist, and is therefore not recognized, in Eurocentric learning and evaluation (Colomb 2012). Moreover, the

Quebec school system focuses on reading and writing as a means of transmitting knowledge, whereas Indigenous cultures traditionally favour the oral transmission of culture (Labrecque 2019).

For example, an Innu student may experience severe stress at the thought of having to hand in homework or write an exam at a specific time, sometimes within a very short deadline. This method is incompatible with a world view in which learning is ongoing, both in and outside of the classroom and long after the term has ended, and in which oral transmission is the preferred means of teaching. This difficult intercultural situation, combined with failure to recognize “other” knowledge, can easily lead to failure (Colomb 2012) and even to students dropping out of school. Yet, despite everything, school education is a priority for Indigenous communities.

Mastery of the language of instruction also has a major impact on adaptation in school. Although French is a second language for most Innu, the college system operates as if it were their first. Thus, although they may meet admission requirements, the Innu who come to our CEGEP for whom French is a second language sometimes have difficulty understanding their teachers, the texts they are assigned to read and the instructions given for homework and exams. Some even told us that they are reticent to speak to each other in their first language at school, on the street or on the bus, for fear of being laughed at.

Wendat students’ identity is similar to that of most students in Quebec. French is their first language, and they aren’t uprooted because they don’t have to leave their community to pursue their studies. In fact, school education has been a Wendat identity marker since the 19th century (Sioui 2011). According to statistics, the Wendat differ from the rest of Quebec’s First Nations in that they have a higher post-secondary graduation rate. For example, there is a 15-point difference between Indigenous and non-Indigenous students who hold a college diploma or university degree (2016 Canadian census; CAPRES 2018), but only a 2-point difference between the Wendat (44.8%) and non-Indigenous Quebec students (46.9%) (2001 Canadian census, in Sioui 2011).

Despite having a student identity comparable to that of most students, some Wendat maintain a very strong cultural identity, which varies based on family education and personality. While some are interested in traditional practices, others are more attracted by hunting and fishing or involved in Indigenous social justice issues (Picard 2019).

Living one’s culture is a personal matter, but transmitting culture is an important issue for this community, which stopped handing down its language in 1830-1850 (Dorais 2015). Not knowing their traditional language is described as a deficiency, a sense that there is something missing. “The quality of language is crucial to personal identity” (Audet 2012, free translation).

There is a need to symbolically assert their identity to differentiate themselves from non-Indigenous Quebecers, as well as from other Indigenous nations (Dorais 2015). This assertion is important for some Wendat, who feel that their right to an identity is denied by both non-Indigenous Quebecers and other Indigenous nations (C.-A. Lesage, personal correspondence, September 25, 2019). Sometimes this denial is internalized, as in the case of a Wendat student interested in activities organized for the college’s Indigenous students: she wondered if she was entitled to participate because she did not speak her traditional language.

INTEGRATION STRATEGIES: LIVE AS A VISIBLE MINORITY OR CHOOSE TO REMAIN INVISIBLE

Because of their phenotype, Innu students are often “visible.” This visibility has an impact on their power relationships and on the social and school integration strategies they apply. The interpersonal relationships between non-Indigenous and Innu students vary considerably but, unfortunately, they are often tainted by ignorance, indifference, discrimination, and even hostility and racism. It goes without saying that most non-Indigenous people are unaware of the enormous challenges that Innu students face in attempting to adapt to college. Few have any idea that most of them often face heavier responsibilities than most students their age (Indspire 2018), that they are under extreme pressure to pass their courses in order to keep their funding from the Band Council, or that they are financially insecure.

They also have to deal on a regular basis with discrimination and rejection when it comes to working in teams, a common learning method in college. Combined with all too common derogatory remarks and isolation, these situations are another reason why Innu students drop out of school. Yet the Innu students who arrive at CEGEP are more determined than anyone. It takes courage to enroll in a “White” college far from home.

For their part, Wendat students do not experience special difficulties when it comes to adapting to college. The financial support provided by their Band Council and the resources available in the community make it far easier for them. The Huron-Wendat development and workforce training centre (CDFM) is one of the main stakeholders in the community that encourage education while promoting the Wendat identity and, in a larger sense, Indigenous identity.

However, even people with a very strong Wendat identity need considerable self-confidence to assert that identity in college. With a phenotype that is usually similar to that of non-Indigenous Quebecers, most Wendat strategically choose not to assert their cultural identity, preferring the protection of “invisibility.”

Generally speaking, Indigenous students feel comfortable telling their close friends that they are Wendat, but only on rare occasions will they assert it openly because of the irreversible consequences in their power relationships with the majority. The classroom should be a safe space for the assertion of cultural identity, since a major concern about “becoming visible” is facing prejudice or being rejected when it comes to working in a team, as is often the case for Innu.

THE VARIABLE GEOMETRY OF IDENTITY ASSERTION

So what does all this mean?

Innu students experience a more profound uprooting than expected because of their phenotype, their first language, culture and academic shock and marginalization.

Wendat students are faced with a more complex intercultural experience than expected: even if they are “invisible,” they share an innate sense of distrust when they arrive in a new setting.

In all cases, “students need to be recognized for their culture and for their individuality, since the issue of Indigenous identity is fundamental”

(Labrecque 2019, free translation).

CONCLUSION: WE NEED TO ADAPT OUR ACTIONS TO ENSURE GREATER CULTURAL SAFETY

In conclusion, we firmly believe that we can take measures at various levels to make CEGEP a safer place for Indigenous students from all nations.

The intercultural exchange between Indigenous students and the college community is a path that starts with integration, a one-way process, and ends with cultural recognition, which implies institutional change (Indspire 2018). Consequently, we need to understand the diversity of the historical and cultural realities of the Indigenous nations and the wealth of their forms of learning. This could lead to a better-informed college community that questions its view of teaching, integrates Indigenous knowledge and its holistic approach, and facilitates direct experimentation and learning outside the classroom.

Then, we need to develop a cultural safety protocol that incorporates these new guidelines and offers Indigenous students the opportunity to willingly disclose their identity when they enroll. Also, as many Indigenous students currently enrolled in the CEGEP have mentioned, a room devoted exclusively to Indigenous activities would help provide cultural safety and ensure student perseverance.

There is also a need for a special French course adapted to Indigenous realities, as well as accommodation measures for evaluations and a service offering based on a desire to understand Indigenous realities.

Indigenous nations are beginning to break the silence in vast numbers, making demands and explaining their needs, which has led to a widespread awareness of the historical injustices they have faced. Indigenous students are part of this movement. We need to allow them to take their rightful place in reconciliation efforts.

Notes

¹ Training is provided by Christine Veilleux and Josée Blanchette, both anthropology teachers at Cégep Limoilou.

² Recently, we have been lifting the veil of secrecy surrounding the residential schools. The broken silence, extensive media coverage and recognition of a need for reconciliation have an impact on identity, but this tragic period in history shattered Indigenous communities' confidence in Eurocentric institutions and teaching methods. "White" people's ignorance and perceived lack of respect for traditional culture and their devaluing of traditional knowledge contribute to this distrust.

³ Adapted Services at Cégep Limoilou has been offering accommodation measures in this regard since fall 2019. Although this is a step in the right direction, we need to do more and extend such initiatives throughout the network.

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