

# FROM KNOWLEDGE TO RECOGNITION CULTURAL SAFETY IN THE SOCIAL SCIENCE PROGRAM AT CÉGEP DE BAIE-COMEAU



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## BACKGROUND

In her most recent work, *Shuni. Ce que tu dois savoir, Julie*, Naomi Fontaine tells about her grandfather's choice to register his daughters in school:

“My grandfather decided that his daughters would go to school and speak French at home. At the expense of the distance he was creating between them and him. At the expense of his own language. And the knowledge handed down by his parents. Of his pride. You see, that's what being colonized means. You doubt your culture's worth. You doubt yourself” (Fontaine 2019, free translation).

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This excerpt is a good illustration of the purpose behind the cultural safety in social science project at Cégep de Baie-Comeau. As social science teachers, we don't claim to understand the reality, history and culture of our Indigenous students better than they do. Our goal is to create safe spaces that give them the confidence they need to learn, express themselves, discuss and share. We want to promote their culture so that they no longer doubt their worth.

Since the 1990s, various practitioners at Cégep de Baie-Comeau have been looking at how Indigenous students are welcomed and included. The number of self-declared Indigenous students in our school varies between 20 and 30 out of approximately 650 students. They are majoritarily Innu.

At first, the cultural safety program had a counsellor hired by the Pessamit<sup>1</sup> Innu Council to follow up with Indigenous students; now they receive individual pedagogical support. The program grew with the creation of the Innuat'z study and gathering room and of an Indigenous sociocultural and pedagogical committee in the early 2000s. In 2015, in partnership with the Centre des Premières Nations Nikanite and the Université du Québec à Chicoutimi (UQAC), and with the support of the local Employment and Training Centre in Betsiamites, the CEGEP created an institutional response guide to help teachers foster the educational success of Indigenous students at Cégep de Baie-Comeau. Two years later, the CEGEP developed another guide, this one intended to help Indigenous students at the CEGEP persevere in their college studies.

Based on these institutional initiatives, Marcel Marsolais, a political science teacher<sup>2</sup> and I, a history and political science teacher, created the From knowledge to recognition program aimed at promoting Indigenous cultures in every social science subject. This article tells the story of this cultural safety project. We describe our approach and our methodology, as well as the tools we developed and their possible applications.

## OBJECTIVES AND DATA COLLECTION

Our aim was to do as much as we could to meet Indigenous students' real needs. It was therefore essential that we consult them from the outset. In fall 2018, we started the project by collecting data. We wanted to know what these students expected to gain from going to CEGEP, what they were concerned about, what they hoped for in terms of social and academic inclusion.

We wanted to get an overview of Indigenous students' needs and expectations, but also to gather information about the current social science program in Baie-Comeau and students' perception of it. To do so, we met with graduates from Uashkaikan secondary school in Pessamit (focus group), Innu students enrolled in the social science program (semi-structured interviews) and Innu graduates of the social science program (online questionnaire).

In an effort to gather the opinions of stakeholders who work with students, we distributed questionnaires to teachers on the social science program committee and conducted interviews with the principal and guidance counsellor at Uashkaikan secondary school, Louise Canapé and Ariane Paquet, as well as with Justine Bacon, the person at the Pessamit Innu Council responsible for students enrolled in post-secondary education. The generosity of students and stakeholders allowed us to establish as accurate a picture as possible of the current situation and to define our objectives with respect to their needs.

The students adopted different stances toward their culture during the interviews: some expressed a clear desire for increased contact with their traditional culture, others were satisfied with their level of familiarity with their culture and wanted to see something new, but still recognized the importance of initiating non-Indigenous people to Indigenous cultures.

With respect to their inclusion in the CEGEP and their classes, they expressed concerns about their Indigenous origin (openness of teachers and students, awkwardness about their accent, fear of prejudice).

**They wanted teachers to initiate non-Indigenous students to Indigenous cultures in order to reduce and even eliminate prejudice. We concluded that we needed to focus on cultural safety.**

By presenting this concept as “the potential resulting from a service offering based on respect and the recognition of historical, cultural, socioeconomic, political and epistemological determinants,” Emmanuelle Dufour provided us with guidelines for the development of our pedagogical tools (Dufour 2019, free translation).

In this process, it was important that our Indigenous students not be further stigmatized and that the spotlight not shine more on them than on other students. That's what gave us the idea to adopt the cultural approach presented by Caroline Moffet in an article published in *Pédagogie collégiale*. The cultural approach involves “being sensitive to our students' origins . . . and being a temporary channel, a teacher who makes students want to understand, to learn about the Other and to share relationships with subject matter through these different viewpoints” (Moffet 2019, free translation). We came to understand that all students would benefit from this approach if the teacher became a “bridge . . . between students' culture and the subject being taught” (Moffet 2019, free translation).

#### **ACTIONS TAKEN AND TOOLS DEVELOPED**

Once we had collected the data, we started the second phase of the project

**To ensure maximum cultural safety for Indigenous students enrolled in the social science program, we decided to work with them before they arrived at the CEGEP.**

We won't necessarily be able to do this with all Indigenous students who enroll in our CEGEP but, since most of them come from the Pessamit Innu community, we built bridges with the Innu Council and Uashkaikan secondary school to facilitate the transition of most Indigenous students from secondary school to CEGEP.

To lessen the shock of the transition, key college resources (guidance counsellor, individual pedagogical support worker, student life advisor) meet with students finishing secondary school. These students also visit the CEGEP on open house days.

We would like to multiply these opportunities to meet with students and create them earlier in students' academic career by organizing "student for a day" days where Indigenous and non-Indigenous students at the CEGEP could act as mentors and guides in the younger students' exploration of post-secondary education.

Social science teachers also participated in activities organized by the Pessamit community to strengthen bonds of trust with students outside the school. The annual Pow Wow, the 2019 archaeological digs and the release of the book *Nutshimit* by Raphaël Picard during Pessamit cultural week were excellent opportunities for meeting with students and engaging in dialogue. We will certainly continue to pursue this avenue in the future.

To create a culturally safe space throughout students' time in the social science program, the teacher responsible for the project developed a number of tools. First, she produced educational activity sheets in collaboration with teachers from every social science subject. The following are a few examples of the topics addressed in the activity sheets:

- Indigenous economic development from the Bay James Agreement to the Plan Nord
- Gender and two-spirit identity
- Referendums on Quebec sovereignty and the self-determination of peoples
- The colonization of the Americas
- Protest movements (Red Power, Idle No More, etc.)

Teachers also have access to an information sheet on First Nations and Inuit in Canada, the United States and New Zealand.

The aim of each activity is to move away from the Western Eurocentric point of view and to see things from the points of view of other peoples.

Each of the sheets provides information about the steps in the activity, the applicable elements of the competency and performance criteria, the concepts and notions addressed, the available

pedagogical materials, the required resources, the suggested educational methods and the complementary resources needed to go yet further. The aim of this measure is to create opportunities to promote Indigenous cultures, but that is not enough. The sheets should be a springboard for making the cultural approach more and more intuitive.

Another key measure is partnering with the Manicouagan Uapishka World Biosphere Reserve (MUWBR) for the program's comprehensive examination. The social science department and the MUWBR offer students the opportunity to do research in a different way.

Accompanied by a department teacher and the MUWBR, students who want to can venture outside the walls of the CEGEP and do part of their research at Uapishka Station in the Groulx mountains. An example of co-management of the territory, the station is owned by the Pessamit Innu Band Council (51%) and the MUWBR (49%). The vast study site allows students to work on a number of issues such as the traditional and contemporary occupation of the territory by Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, northern governance, social acceptability, adaptation to climate change, and sustainable development in a resource-based region.

The first cohort of social science students will participate in the project in winter 2020. They all chose to work directly or indirectly on issues affecting North Shore Indigenous Communities (e.g. the impact of diet on wellness and identity development, initiatives aimed at promoting Innu culture in schools, the impact of humans on the survival of woodland caribou).

Lastly, in an effort to increase the scope of this sensitization to Indigenous cultures, a complementary course was developed in collaboration with the Pessamit Innu Council's Education and Culture sector. The course Innu Aitun and First Nations, Métis and Inuit cultures in Canada will be offered for the first time in fall 2020. The focus is on Innu culture so that non-Indigenous students can develop a better understanding of the communities with which they share the North Shore. In this course, students will develop their competencies with traditional Indigenous forms of learning such as observation, application and the oral transmission of memory. Their points of view will be at the heart of knowledge building.

### DEVELOPMENT OPPORTUNITIES

It is difficult to see the actual impact of these measures right now, because most of them were implemented in 2019-2020 or will be in 2020-2021. Nevertheless, we can already see that non-Indigenous students are open to learning about Indigenous cultures.

We also feel that stronger bonds of trust are beginning to form between non-Indigenous students and their Indigenous counterparts throughout their time at school.

The tools developed for the project can be used in other colleges, but we suggest adapting them to the specific characteristics of students' communities.<sup>3</sup>

We are now adopting a step-by-step approach. By providing teachers with training and educational tools, we hope to continue to raise awareness and eliminate inertia, discomfort and fear of awkwardness, thereby multiplying opportunities for discussion among all members of the college community. ♦

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### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Innu community located approximately 40 km from Baie-Comeau.

<sup>2</sup> Marcel Marsolais retired from teaching in the early days of the official implementation of the project.

<sup>3</sup> Teachers and education consultants who are interested in learning more can contact Lysandre St-Pierre, the teacher responsible for the project at Cégep de Baie-Comeau.

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### References

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