A Seat at the Table: An Academic’s View of the Importance of Information Professionals in Decolonizing the Academy

For more than a decade, academics have discussed and challenged each other on the possibilities for universities to play a role in the decolonization of Canadian society. Responding to Linda Tuhwai Smith’s powerful book *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous People* (1999), Findlay (2000) encouraged Canadian academics to “Always Indigenize!” The findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015) have renewed interest in the possibility that our methodologies, research strategies and pedagogical practices should/can be decolonized. Not everyone is pleased with the focus on “Indigenizing” and debates rage about what the concept entails. There are those who feel that the focus should be kept firmly on *decolonizing* (Tuhwai Smith, 1999) and others who remain skeptical of such attempts, suggesting they amount to “co-opting a limited and decreasing supply of Indigenous knowledge holders into teaching non-Indigenous [people] rather than our own.” (Andrea Bear Nicholas in Hill, 2012) Many questions around indigenization/decolonization clearly demand our attention, especially those of intention and likely outcomes.

Awareness of concerns raised by those skeptical of the university’s potential for playing an important role in responding to the TRC’s broader insistence that Canada confront its colonial past is of course essential. Nonetheless, we have to start somewhere with what Jacqueline Ottmann (2013) describes as “the opening of a closed system”. It is clearly the case that information professionals – both librarians and archivists – have a potentially important role in encouraging academics to take the task ahead of us seriously.

My belief in this “potential” role is, of course, premised on the assumption that many informational professionals will be inspired to take the findings of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission seriously and will, as a result, want to engage seriously with its recommendations. This will doubtless necessitate a steep learning curve beginning with a close reading of Volume Six (*Reconciliation*) of the Commission’s findings.

Having established their interest in, and commitment to, the task ahead, information professionals must then obtain a “seat at the table” to enable their full engagement in the important conversations that need to be held within the academy. That is to say, librarians and archivists need to insist (if they are not invited) that they be included in the discussions around indigenization. This necessarily means they must seek to understand the structures of the institution within which they work and offer advice about where the discussions can/should be held and, in addition, request ex-officio status on any relevant committee including those concerned with teaching and research in the areas of their expertise. I argue that this is important not least because information professionals are crucial guides to the availability of resources and can thereby assist academics with the difficult task ahead.

It is, of course, easier to suggest that information professionals committed to the indigenizing process demand a seat at the table while, in practice, this may prove to be a difficult task. It is alas the case that many academics and university administrators fail to appreciate the level of professional expertise on offer. Many academics, for instance, take the requirement that they submit new course proposals to librarians for comment on the institutional holdings in the area of
study as a mere formality and fail to see critical comments as being helpfully offered by a research colleague. It is crucial that librarians and archivists develop relationships with faculty members who display an awareness of the importance of information services and then build alliances with them in an effort to move the important task at hand to the center of all relevant discussions. Together, concerned academics and library professionals can play an important part in the shaping of the conversations around the issues raised by the TRC.

With this important presence on relevant committees established, the information professionals will be well situated to encourage serious engagement with the issues arising and provide guidance about available materials and developing trends. In the face of resistance on the part of faculty colleagues who are resentful about the university’s efforts toward indigenization or simply skeptical about the possibility that their own work has anything to do with the goal, librarians will need to be aware of those who would seek simply to use information professionals as a source of bibliographic information to be added to “additional reading” lists of their syllabi believing that to be sufficient.\(^1\) Developing a collection strategy in response to this new effort is, needless to say, a crucial step. But working with the information and resources to aid in steering the conversation toward the decolonizing mission will necessarily mean accepting an advocacy role and not shying away from controversy around difficult issues. Again, this task would seem most logically to be conducted in alliance with academic colleagues committed to achieving the same objective.

**Moving from the general to the specific... the SASS example**

To be quite specific about CBU, it is interesting to note the structure and commitment of the School of Arts and Social Sciences. The “SASS Librarian” is offered regular opportunities to present information and guide discussions around teaching and research at its regular school meetings in the regularly scheduled “SASS forum”. Making the most of such opportunities to make contact with faculty members and encouraging their engagement with the goal of indigenizing the academy and encouraging an open dialogue around the issues raised by the TRC is of crucial importance. Linked to this is the importance of making the case for that “seat at the table.” The attached diagram of the School’s structure indicates that the SASS Librarian should be given ex-officio status on both the teaching and research committees: such a role would ensure that information professionals are working alongside and in partnership with the academics as they undertake the necessary conversations around the decolonization of our minds and our institutions.

\(^1\) To provide an example of the difference we can reflect on the standard course in western political thought offered...
Guide to School of Arts and Social Sciences as of July 1st, 2016

Dean's Council
- Dean (Chair)
- Associate Dean (Student Affairs)
- Chair of SASS
- Chair of Faculty Affairs (2)
- Chair of Student Affairs (2)
- Chair of Teaching Committee
- Chair of Research Committee
- Chair of Recruitment and Retention Committee
- Director of Boardmore (ex-officio)

School Assembly
- School Executive (Chair, Vice-chair and Secretary)
- Teaching Committee (4 faculty+Dean (Assoc. Dean)+SPO+ORTGS+2 students)
- Research Committee (4 faculty+Dean (Assoc. Dean)+ORTGS +2 students)
- Marketing, Recruitment and Retention Committee (4 faculty+Dean (Assoc. Dean)+Marketing +Recruitment+2 students)

Dean's Office
- Dean
- Associate Dean (Student Affairs)
- Assistant to Dean
- School Secretary (2)
Sources


