What is decolonization? What is Indigenization?¹

Decolonization could be understood as “taking away the colonial” but this raises the question of what colonial means. Colonization involves one group taking control of the lands, resources, languages, cultures, and relationships of another group. In Canada and the US, where human habitation on these lands began with Indigenous peoples and continued with European migrants who arrived with the intent to claim the lands as their own, colonial usually means Eurocentric. This means that Western European-derived ways of being, believing, knowing, and doing are implicitly or explicitly presented as the standard or norm, and other ways of being, knowing, and doing are implicitly or explicitly presented as “other,” alternative, or less worthy.² Later arrivants to this territory have had to adapt to this Eurocentric norm.

In Canada, decolonization is usually discussed in terms of the relationship between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, and particularly associated with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s final report and Calls to Action.³ It is related to Indigenous resurgence (Indigenous people reclaiming and restoring their culture, land, language, relationships, health, etc., both independent of and with the support of non-Indigenous people). Decolonization is also associated with other relationships between groups of people within Canada and in other countries and contexts around the world, and for some, is linked to broader principles of inclusion and equity.⁴

¹ There is no clear definition of decolonization or Indigenization; all definitions are complex, multi-faceted, and contested. This resource offers a starting place, but understanding decolonization is a journey that takes a lifetime. It should also be noted that this document was written by a settler author for an expected audience that is primarily non-Indigenous.


³ Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada 2015.

Canada’s identity as a *settler colonial* state complicates the task of decolonization, since the original colonizers never left and since acts of colonization continue to the present.⁵ For instance, in Canada settler colonialism is evident in federal government policies such as the Indian Act and the Indian Residential Schools system,⁶ provincial government child welfare decisions,⁷ and non-Indigenous peoples’ refusal (either blatant or subtle) to give up land or acknowledge the land and treaty rights of Indigenous people.⁸

If decolonization is the removal or undoing of colonial elements, then Indigenization could be seen as the addition or redoing of Indigenous elements. Indigenization moves beyond tokenistic gestures of recognition or inclusion to meaningfully change practices and structures.⁹ Power, dominance and control are rebalanced and returned to Indigenous peoples, and Indigenous ways of knowing and doing are perceived, presented, and practiced as equal to Western ways of knowing and doing. Examples of Indigenization in education could include the inclusion of Indigenous readings, adoption of Indigenous learning approaches in the classroom. For non-Indigenous people, there can be a fine line between Indigenization and cultural appropriation and it is important to seek appropriate guidance while recognizing that guidance can come from many sources.

People disagree about what the end goal of decolonization and Indigenization is or should be.¹⁰ We suggest that rather than focusing on the end goal, you consider two elements. First, it’s important to think about the reasons you’re decolonizing: who are you doing it for and why are you doing it? This helps avoid issues of tokenism and recolonization. Second, remember that

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⁶ See the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

⁷ See the Ontario Human Rights Commission report *Under Suspicion*.

⁸ For ethnographic analysis of a few case studies, see Mackey 2016.

⁹ See Coulthard 2014.

¹⁰ See Tuck and Yang 2012.
decolonization is a process, not a product. Instead of wondering where the finish line is, take a step along the journey and see where it leads you.

Ten ideas for first steps:

1. Speak a land acknowledgment at the start of each course, department meeting, or event. Learn how to pronounce the names appropriately, and how to speak it meaningfully and not tokenistically. Without making it all about you, explain how you are implicated and affected by what you’re saying. A few resources are below.
2. Learn more about the history and reality of Indigenous peoples in the land currently known as Canada and the land upon which Queen’s University sits. A few resources are below.
3. Hire Indigenous faculty and staff and be prepared to listen and adapt your practices rather than expecting them to adapt to yours.
4. Take anti-racist, intercultural competency, and/or inclusivity and diversity training from the Office of Human Rights and Equity and the Queen’s University International Centre.
5. Connect with CTL staff and programs, and with the growing number of Indigenous elders, knowledge keepers, curriculum specialists, and educational support professionals around campus, to talk about your specific situation.
6. Find opportunities on Queen’s campus and in the Kingston area for cultural dialogue and exchange (e.g., Four Directions Indigenous Student Centre; arts programming at the Agnes, the Isabel, and numerous arts organizations and festivals around Kingston; Indigenous Languages Nest at the Faculty of Education, AKA Autonomous Social Centre)
7. Re-examine your course syllabus with an eye to uncovering Eurocentricism and fostering inclusivity, diversity, and Indigeneity.
8. Commit to a lifelong journey rather than expecting a simple quick fix. Decolonization is a process, not a product or a box to be checked.
9. Do the work yourself. Addressing the Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Action is the responsibility of EVERY resident of Canada, and addressing the Queen’s University Truth and Reconciliation Task Force’s Calls to Action is the responsibility of
EVERY person at Queen’s. Decolonization cannot be delegated to a single person in an office or left to a few departments on campus.

10. Ask for help, and share your successes and failures with others. This is not a journey that you need to take alone.

Three key reads:


Land acknowledgment resources:

Four Directions Indigenous Student Centre resource, “Acknowledgment of Territory”: https://www.queensu.ca/fourdirections/resources-queens-community/acknowledgement-territory


Canadian and Kingston history resources:

Stones Kingston social history project: https://www.stoneskingston.ca

Queen’s University Truth and Reconciliation Commission Task Force final report
(Yakwanastahentéha / Aankenjigemi / Extending the Rafters, 2017):
https://www.queensu.ca/inclusive/initiatives/truth-and-reconciliation

Thomas King, The Inconvenient Indian (Toronto: Doubleday Canada, 2012)

Works Cited


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