

From Discomfort to Accountability: Exploring an Ethical Relational Approach to Teaching Anti-racism and Decolonisation in a Canadian Introductory Social Work Classroom



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Abstract

In this article, we share results from an introductory social work course evaluation that infused an ethical relational approach into anti-racist and decolonial pedagogy. 53 of the 137 students enrolled in the course provided written informed consent. A variety of creative approaches, including reflective writing, podcasts, infographics, social media posts, and letters to the editor, were used to capture students' understanding of social work history, ethics, theories and approaches, and their emerging social work identity and future practice aspirations. The data was managed with NVivo 14, and thematic analysis was used to analyse the data. Study findings suggest that this approach contributed to students' demonstrated awareness and comprehension of decolonial and anti-racist concepts, leading to critical self-reflection, empathy, and a greater appreciation for diverse perspectives. These findings emphasise the need for pedagogical advancements prioritising ethical relationality in preparing students for social work practice grounded in decolonial and anti-racist principles.

Introduction

- Anti-racist and decolonial approaches to social work education are vital given the history of slavery and settler-colonialism in Canada that systematically oppressed Indigenous and Black communities in pursuit of settler-colonial nation-building^{1,2,3}.
- Anti-racist and decolonial approaches to social work education are vital because service users are overrepresented by Indigenous and Black populations in Canada, and university environments are grounded on racist and colonial tactics^{4,5,6}.
- Social work literature in anti-racist education outlines the need to engage students in an anti-racist implicit and explicit curriculum⁷.
- Decolonising approaches invite settlers (white settlers and settlers of colour) to confront their own implication in settler-colonialism and "work to reverse internalised values and beliefs that lead to the subjugation of Indigenous peoples"⁸.
- As social workers and educators, we were dedicated to cultivating a teaching approach that grounded students in an anti-racist and decolonial learning environment.

Material and Methods

Study Area: Our study was conducted at the Faculty of Social Work, University of Calgary. The University of Calgary is a public university in Canada with campuses located in the territories of First Nations Peoples of Treaty 7, the traditional homes to the Kainai Nation, Piikani Nation, Siksika Nation, Tsuu T'ina Nation, and the Bearspaw, Chiniki, and Wesley (Stoney—Nakoda) Nations.

Research Context: We adopted a relationship-based teaching approach to ensure trust and openness between us and the students and aid them in the free expression of their thoughts, feelings, and reflections. This research drew from students' reflections in course assignments submitted to Desire to Learn (D2L) to evaluate how effective the decolonial and anti-racist pedagogical design of the course is within a relationship-based teaching approach.

Population and Sample: Our study population includes all the students registered for Introduction to Social Work (SOWK 201) in the Fall of 2023. The 134 enrolled in the course made up the study population. It is important to state that not all students are enrolled in the social work program. The sample consisted of 53 students who gave their approval for their assignment to be extracted for the research.

Data Collection: Data collected for the study was generated from assignment 2, designed to support learners in demonstrating their understanding and application of course materials.

Data Analysis: All the collected data were exported to a qualitative analysis tool, NVivo 14©, for management and analysis. We immersed ourselves in the data through multiple reads to familiarise ourselves with it. We reflected on our preliminary thoughts on the data to inform our codes. We then conducted inductive coding, combining texts and pictures into labelled codes associated with the research questions. Each participant's assignment was systematically reviewed to ensure comprehensive coding.

Results

Teaching approach

Ethical relationship-based teaching approach

❖ "Throughout the course, my interactions with the professors have been filled with nothing but open communication and enlightenment. The material in the course that I felt resonated with me the most was . . . where guest speakers dive into decolonial social work practice" (*Lily*).

The 'use of self' in teaching

❖ "The discussions on privilege and oppression pushed me out of my comfort zone, prompting me to critically examine my own biases and assumptions. This discomfort, though challenging, was instrumental in expanding my perspective. When [one of the instructors] shared personal experiences with us, including walking past her Edmonton office, where many impoverished people are being forcibly removed, I was particularly taken aback by how serious these situations are" (*Kat*).

Understanding of power dynamics and privileges

Critical self-reflection on power and social locations

❖ "As a white, cis-gendered, straight-passing, middle-classed, housed, able-bodied, English-speaking, educated, young settler, I come from a place of incredible privilege. I've been aware of these social aspects of my life that contribute to my position of privilege and the associated responsibilities of said privilege for the majority of my adulthood, but I never had a word for this grouping of circumstances, and I hadn't considered how this social location could affect my relationship with future clients until taking this course. This knowledge will affect my professional life in that I now know to be mindful of the power differentials that will exist between myself and clients, as well as how this may affect their level of trust in my authority to provide help and my ability to understand their problems" (*Jenny*).

Empathy and cultural humility

❖ "I felt very anxious about my knowledge gaps until the guest lecture we had with [an anti-black racism guest professor], where he said that you don't need to have perfect knowledge of all other cultures, just a willingness to learn about all cultures" (*Mike*).

Commitment to change

Appreciation for diversity

❖ "I was really impressed by and deeply appreciated the amount of thought-provoking discussion that took place among the instructors, guest lecturers and students. I appreciated hearing diverse perspectives and learned a lot about myself and my worldview as a result. Setting this example early was important, because open and authentic communication among colleagues in both social worker and multidisciplinary teams is extremely important from a professional and ethical standpoint" (*Rose*).

Impact on practice

❖ The greatest challenge to my thinking was the deeper learning about privilege and social location and how they affect everything. Just a week after our lecture on privilege, I had an interaction with a patient of colour who was extremely particular about asking me for painfully precise treatment details -in writing-before we could begin treatment. Initially, I felt mistrusted and offended, but after some reflection, I realised that it has always been my privilege to expect to be trusted and taken at my word (*Esther*).

Discussion and Conclusion

- ❖ Canadian professional social work has largely been informed by a Western worldview, resulting in inadequate services for communities disproportionately accessing social work supports.
- ❖ Following the recommendation of Donald (2012), our approach to anti-racist and decolonial education centred on creating an inclusive space to support ethical relationships. We aimed to cultivate a relational environment through mutual recognition and respect for inherent differences, a deep understanding of our own positionality, and a sense of responsibility towards one another.
- ❖ This approach allowed students to critically examine their relationship with power, privilege, and whiteness, understanding that the goal was not to instil shame but rather to inspire a commitment to effecting positive change.
- ❖ This process of reflection on power and privilege was crucial in helping students grasp the realities of systemic oppression, countering dominant narratives that have stigmatized BIPOC communities.
- ❖ With this paper, we aim to catalyse a broader dialogue around embedding ethical relationship-based approaches into social work education, creating a foundation for challenging, transformative conversations.

