



Working Towards Competency in Indigenous Cultural Safety BY CAROLYN CAMILLERI

Indigenous cultural safety is not a new concept. The Transformative Change Accord was signed in November 2005 by the province, federal government, and First Nations Leadership Council, and it speaks to the development of cultural competency training.¹

The Truth and Reconciliation Commission released its final report in 2015. Calls to Action 18 to 24 refer generally to health care, with number 23 specifically referencing cultural competency training for all health care professionals.²

In 2015, all the CEOs from BC Health Authority signed the Declaration of Commitment to advance cultural humility and cultural safety within health services.³

In May 2016, Canada officially removed its “objector status” from the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and committed to a renewed, nation-to-nation relationship with Indigenous Peoples based on recognition of rights, respect, co-operation, and partnership.⁴

So this is not new. What is “newer” is the increasing awareness among many

non-Indigenous counsellors that they have some work to do.

Vanessa Mitchell joined Interior Health Authority in 2015 as an Aboriginal Cultural Safety Educator and has built the program. Now, she is program manager for a team of three educators, a knowledge facilitator, and an administrative assistant.

“When I think about this work that I do and that I’m engaged in and that I’m working on with my team and this journey that I’ve been on, I very much talk about how it’s not just hard work, it’s heart work,” says Mitchell.



LOOKING FOR RESOURCES?

Interior Health Authority has a number of resources available on its website, including a podcast series called *Interior Voices* and a YouTube channel featuring a storyboard and a number of engagement videos about cultural safety.

Interior Health also has an extensive library of resources listed on its website under Aboriginal Health. While the library belongs to Interior Health, publishing details are included so you can source the materials on your own.

▶ <https://iha.andornot.com>

A TRAINING STARTING POINT

The San'yas Indigenous Cultural Safety (ICS) Training Program is an accredited, online program designed to enhance self-awareness and strengthen the skills of those who work directly and indirectly with Indigenous people. ICS has a module designed for non-Indigenous mental health professionals.

▶ <http://www.sanyas.ca>

Note: The curriculum is intended as introductory training to be supplemented by Nation-specific and region-specific training.

That comment is important not only because it demonstrates her commitment, but also because it carries an essential message for non-Indigenous counsellors: attaining Indigenous cultural competency is hard work — and heart work.

“As people engage in this journey, they’re going to realize it’s not just at the professional level,” says Mitchell. “To be real and to be transformative, it does become personal.”

Competency in cultural safety is not a “tick box” on a list of requirements: there are layers in this learning journey and each person has to define what that work involves.

“We have the ability to determine how much competency we build — competency meaning the skills, the knowledge base, doing some research, reading some books, engaging in dialogue,” she explains. “But a big part of it is self-reflection and critical thought. How important is this work for you? Because when I think of our Aboriginal communities, we’ve been doing this for a very long time. Right now, it’s called cultural safety, but, really, it was always about social justice and about access, reducing barriers, trying to have a voice.”

Mitchell has some key messages that may assist non-Indigenous counsellors.

KNOW WHO YOU ARE

Mitchell introduces herself very intentionally: “My name is Vanessa Mitchell. I am an Okanagan woman, mother, daughter, sister, aunt, niece, friend. I was born and raised in Inkumupulux, which is colonially referred to as the Okanagan Indian Band Reserve. I have two children and I have four stepchildren for a total of six children, ranging from 14-25 years of age. My partner is from the Nlaka’pamux Nation. My parents are Eric Mitchell and Chris Marchand. My father has family ties to the St’at’imc Nation through his father and grandfather.”

Behind that introduction is a solid grounding in her identity. She knows the stories of her ancestors from her family but also through community involvement, including working in theatre, Friendship Centres, her Nation, and with youth and Elders. She devoted her education to Indigenous studies because she needed to understand the colonial narrative and how it impacts her.

Having that in-depth knowledge of your identity is an important part of cultural safety. Mitchell says she sometimes hears Canadians introduce themselves as second, third, fourth, or fifth generation Canadians.

“It’s wonderful that they introduce themselves that way, but I also think, who else are you? Go to your roots. Who are your people? What are your stories? What are the teachings that come from the land you might be from? Whether it is on the continent of Turtle Island or on other lands, that’s such a rich piece in the grounding of who are you and where you come from.”



Attaining Indigenous cultural competency is hard work — and heart work.

UNDERSTAND THAT OUR EDUCATION SYSTEM IS INCOMPLETE

It is not uncommon to have completed post-secondary education and still know very little or nothing about the colonial narrative.

Some people respond to the colonial narrative by saying they weren’t there and weren’t part of it. Mitchell’s father’s response is astute: “You know what? Neither was I. And yet here we are.”

“There certainly have been strides [in education] — I don’t want to minimize that there have been strides — but when we think of the longevity of colonization and the colonial narrative, it’s only been a blip in time by comparison,” says Mitchell.

Learning that colonial narrative — and how it persists within our structures and systems — is not easy.



“Some people want to learn only the culture of a people, without getting to know the full story and the impacts of the colonial narrative. Mitchell calls this ‘cultural voyeurism.’”

“We have to remember that growth does not happen in our comfort zone,” she says, referencing Brené Brown. “Courage takes great vulnerability.”

Mitchell talks about survivors of the Sixties Scoop and Residential School and their tremendous vulnerability in sharing stories of trauma and endurance. “If people who are survivors can share that, then we, too, should be able to show and practise vulnerability as we’re learning.”

KNOW THAT CULTURAL SAFETY IS NOT ABOUT TEACHING CULTURE

Some people want to learn only the culture of a people, without getting to know the full story and the impacts of the colonial narrative. Mitchell calls this “cultural voyeurism” — a form of entertainment and pleasure. At the same time, she doesn’t want to discourage anyone from participating in community events.

“If you’re not engaged in doing the work and the self-reflection and the research and you just go for pleasure, there’s a risk of it being cultural voyeurism,” she says. “But if you’re doing the work — you’re making connections on the ground, you’ve been invited or you see a public event and you’re going to experience that from a community lens in addition to your work — that’s where you’re going to have that avenue open up to you around culture.”

Culture and teaching culture must come from the grassroots — from the people. Cultural safety is about unpacking

the colonial narrative today.

“Cultural safety is really speaking to power imbalances, structured systems, and self-reflection,” she says. “When we think about power and the imbalance of power, recognize that as health care providers, you have power and privilege, because our recipients of care, no matter who they are and where they come from, they’re vulnerable by the simple fact that they’re asking for our help.”

RECOGNIZE THAT THIS IS A JOURNEY

Some questions everyone should be able to answer. Do you know who the Indigenous people are around you? Do you know which First Nation’s land you reside, work, and play on? Have you connected with the Métis, Urban Aboriginal, and First Nations communities?

Take it up a level and ask yourself: Who are you including in your sphere of influence or your circle? Who are you not including and why not?

Mitchell says that’s part of the self-reflection, because each individual has to examine the reasons behind answers. Are there stereotypes? Are there fears? Are there worries about offending?

“Again, I encourage vulnerability, because we need to take that first step in this journey of cultural safety,” says Mitchell, comparing it to a path where we stumble and fall. “It’s about that commitment to get back up and keep going.”

And be gentle with yourself.

“It’s about recognizing your humanity and being aware, because when we’re not aware, the potential of harm to occur is high, intentionally or unintentionally.”

REFERENCES

1 Transformative Change Accord: First Nations Health Plan. https://www.health.gov.bc.ca/library/publications/year/2006/first_nations_health_implementation_plan.pdf

2 Truth and Reconciliation Commission’s Calls to Actions. http://trc.ca/assets/pdf/Calls_to_Action_English2.pdf

3 Declaration of Commitment. First signed in July 2015 by all BC Health Authority CEOs, the declaration has since been signed by a long list of regulatory colleges and health care associations. A First Nations Health

Authority release from June 13, 2019 provides insights and updates: <http://www.fnha.ca/about/news-and-events/news/signing-declaration-of-commitment-to-cultural-safety-and-humility-with-doctors-of-bc-represents-two-families-coming-together>

4 United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP). In 2010, Canada endorsed UNDRIP, which was considered inspirational rather than legally binding. In May 2016, Canada officially removed its “objector status” and supports UNDRIP without qualification. <https://www.aadnc-aandc.gc.ca/eng/1309374407406/1309374458958>