

The Orange Shirt Project as a Collaborative Approach to Reconciling

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Abstract

In this paper, we discuss a community-based knitting project that is a response to the Canadian Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Call to Action to educate about the legacy of Indigenous Residential Schools. We highlight the need to keep the concept of reconciliation active by using its verb form to point to the need for ongoing work. We next focus on the ways in which The Orange Shirt Project (TSOP) touches on both Indigenous pedagogies and the responsibility of public pedagogues, such as university faculty, to engage in work that enacts public agency. Finally, we tie our work back to the importance of relationships and relational ethics in doing the work of reconciling. Our goal is to show this project as a reproducible form of activism that can occur in multiple contexts.

KEYWORDS: RECONCILIATION, PUBLIC PEDAGOGIES, INDIAN RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS, ORANGE SHIRT PROJECT

In December of 2015 the Canadian Commission on Truth and Reconciliation released its Final Report, produced through thousands of hours of testimony gathered from Indian Residential School survivors across Canada, as well as from archival documents relating to the functioning of those schools, such as they were. In short, it was estimated that more than 150,000 Indigenous children were removed from their homes for “education” in these schools (McMahon, 2021). The Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC, 2015) estimated that approximately 3201 did not return home; however, Justice Murray Sinclair, head of the TRC, has argued that this number is likely higher, estimating 6,000 children but likely more (CBC Radio, 2021).

As startling as those numbers are, it is widely known in Indigenous communities that the numbers could not be accurate, given the recollections of survivors, and that the Commission has access to incomplete records as the result of “the sporadic record keeping and poor document survival” (Hamilton, 2021, p. 2). But at least the Commission’s report was a start, and through the additional release of *94 Calls to Action*, it offered Canadians both a starting point to fuel conversations on reconciliation and decolonisation, as well as some direction regarding how to move forward together in a better way.

In this paper, we discuss a community-based knitting project as an example of a collaborative act of reconciling that we are currently engaged with at our home institution. In curricular terms the Tiny Orange Shirt Project (TSOP) may relate most closely to the areas of Home

Leddy, S., & Renwick, K. (2022). The Orange Shirt Project as a Collaborative Approach to Reconciling. *International Journal of Home Economics*, 15(1), 133-143.

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Economics and Visual Art. However, it has the potential to be widely transdisciplinary and therefore holistic in nature, drawing in other curriculum areas such as Social Studies—history, sociology and Language Arts can be better seen as a natural fit for decolonising and reconciling learning. In countries such as Australia and Canada educators in schools are required to integrate Indigenous content into the learning experiences offered to students. Bishop and Vass (2020) have noted that within a curriculum that has been shaped by both neoliberal and colonial agenda positions, engaging with Indigenous content is represented as a distant idea and speaks to Giroux’s “important questions about the politics of representation” (2004, p. 66).

The low numbers of Indigenous educators in schools (BC Government, 2019; Johnson, 2017) and the extent that teachers with a settler background are able to reconcile Indigenous perspectives and content in their work underscore the value of transdisciplinary approaches. Secondly, we suggest that this transdisciplinary potential also offers an entry in Indigenous pedagogies of use across disciplines, both because of its collaborative nature, and because of its potential for inclusivity and recursion. Third, we suggest that as an act of public pedagogy the TSOP is also a way of representing the number of children lost, understanding the significance of these events, and offering potential for replication in other sites and contexts. Ultimately, TSOP is a move towards decolonising teaching and learning in that it deliberately disrupts the siloed nature of modern schools as well insisting on a collaborative rather than individualistic act of meaning making. Knitting the orange sweater offers possibilities as a mindful act for the knitter, as a way to engage in both the producing and creation of a sweater. The collection of multiple little orange sweaters contributed by many knitters is about a common purpose of both remembrance and a provocation to think differently about Indigenous experience, specifically in Canada. The installation of many little orange sweaters in a public area that includes dialogic panels and multimedia offers ongoing possibilities for understanding and reconciliation, especially as it is located in a faculty of education.

Our engagement with public pedagogies and intention to contribute to the decolonisation of teaching and learning within our university is explored in this paper in four moves. Initially we focus on the use of verbs within the Call to Action. We move on to consider how Indigenous pedagogies both require and support collaborative practice, and then take into consideration public pedagogies as a means for doing something such as knitting. Lastly, we describe the ways in which the TSOP has developed and is evolving at our site.

Verb-Based Languages and the Calls to Action

While the Calls to Action offer avenues to reconciliation for Government, Sport, Social Work, and several other key institutions of daily life in Canada, we focus specifically on one call aimed at the Education sector:

62. *We call upon the federal, provincial, and territorial governments, in consultation and collaboration with Survivors, Aboriginal peoples, and educators, to:*
 - i. *Make age-appropriate curriculum on residential schools, Treaties, and Aboriginal peoples' historical and contemporary contributions to Canada a mandatory education requirement for Kindergarten to Grade Twelve students.*
 - ii. *Provide the necessary funding to post-secondary institutions to educate teachers on how to integrate Indigenous knowledge and teaching methods into classrooms.*

(TRC Calls to Action, 2015, n.p.)

Although straightforward in naming what is required in this sector, this call poses a challenge in two key ways. First, this Call's broad nature deflects the tendency of many educators to place this work in a singular curricular silo. In keeping with the holistic focus of most Indigenous teaching and learning, its deliberate vagueness leaves open the possibility for responsive and experiential work in all subject areas, and the potential to weave Indigeneity throughout learning at all levels. Second, and this is more a problem of the institution at which it is directed than of the call itself, since those who are called upon to take up this work are ironically also those who have been deliberately unprepared to do so by virtue of the colonial erasures in their own education (Leddy & O'Neill, 2022). While there is a growing body of resources produced by Indigenous scholars, educators and community members, without engaging in specific and targeted *un-learning*, teachers will risk replicating the same deletions and colonial mythologies that this call aims to eliminate. This is the soul work that decolonising education calls for.

We are intentional in this work to refer to reconciling as an undercurrent of this project. Reconciliation is a noun, which, as several scholars have pointed out (Whitinui, 2021), risks telegraphing the idea that it is a done deal, a *fait accompli* that requires no further action. In keeping with Giroux's (2004) discussion of the responsibility of public intellectuals, we wish to disrupt this potential for lassitude by using the verb form, insisting that reconciling is an ongoing action that must be undertaken by each of us. We link this to the frequent assertion that most Indigenous languages, in Canada at least, are verb based (Michell, 2018). That is, the action often comes before the subject or object of a sentence. This inverted sentence structure (sort of like the way Star Wars' Yoda speaks) is instructive in itself for keeping the focus on the *doing* rather than on *who* is doing. Conceptually, this points to a key ontological difference between Indigenous and Western ways of thinking. It is less the individual doing the thing that matters than it is that the thing that is being done. This is the way of decolonising and reconciling too.

Indigenous Pedagogies and the Power of Working Together

The Tiny Orange Sweater Project, initiated by Jennifer Kent Symons on Facebook in summer 2021, now has more than 448 members across Canada. Lorrie Miller, Shannon Leddy and Kerry Renwick were inspired to develop a related project that could provide powerful pedagogical opportunities in the teacher education program in which we all work. Hosted by Department of Curriculum & Pedagogy the TOSP offers students, faculty and staff the opportunity to participate in the creation of a permanent installation in the education building that will offer visceral evidence of the atrocious outcomes from Indian Residential Schools across Canada.

In this light, our project offers three key links to Indigenous pedagogies in that it is first a holistic in approach, offering learning opportunities and curricular innovations across subject areas. Second, the TSOP is a collective project that builds on the power of all of us working together over one of us working alone and points to the importance of collectivity in Indigenous worldviews. Third, our project encourages student participation in whatever way the student is able or chooses; that is, contributions are not prescriptive or restrictive, but rather invite students to shine in their own way.

The culmination of the TSOP will be a three-story-high multi-panel fabric installation each of which will hold up to 1500 tiny orange shirts and sweaters. To gather that many pieces together, we have invited all members of our faculty to make contributions, recognising that even the idea of this project and the image of a large-scale installation may spark creative energy in our colleagues. The panels will offer opportunities to enumerate, discern, inspire, provoke, research, contribute, engage, reverse-engineer or design, write, create, recreate, compare, record and generally learn from, through, and with for students in all of our departments and disciplines.

Equally important is the pause for thought that creating something so large together might affect in educational discourse. While Western and colonial thinking tend to draw on the Lockean propensity to prefer individualism (Seawright, 2014), Indigenous thinking tends to more collective and less anthropocentric understandings (Michell, 2018). On the surface, this may seem merely a semantic difference, but we argue that it is deeply instructive in the impact that collective thinking, planning and doing can have towards both notions of achievement and inclusivity. As Little Bear (2000) points out, in Indigenous thinking, the responsibility of the individual is to the community and to learn what is needed to support the wellbeing of the community. Imagine the nurturing shift this might make if we approached revising education with that ethic in mind.

As educators in Home Economics and Art we are well aware of the need to develop student centred projects and pedagogies. We cannot bake a project or create a sculpture on behalf of our students—we need to support them as they learn to do it themselves. This philosophical positioning must also accommodate the fact that students each shine in different ways. Both Arts and HE education encompass several specific areas of potential study: painting, drawing, sculpture, and printmaking for the former, and culinary, sartorial, and familial for the other. By exploring each, students can self-select those they feel most adept at and express their learning in ways that speak to their strengths and talents. In this light, we anticipate that the TOSP will offer similar latitude in how students are invited to contribute. Those who do not knit may crochet; those who do not bead may sew. And those who do neither may write, or sing, or apply a mathematical formula that will in part. be supported by dialogic panels and multimedia elements to be included in the installation. What matters in this type of learning is the process and engagement rather than the product.

Public Pedagogy and Meeting the Need to DO Something

One of the most challenging aspects of working through truth to get to a place of reconciling is often the feeling of helplessness in the face of so much trauma and its consequences in the present (Dion, 2009). One of the most readily evident benefits of the TOSP then is to meet this need by offering the opportunity to participate, collaborate and contribute. But this work also touches on the importance of collectivity referred to earlier, in that it also means we support one another through the challenges of this learning, of grappling with difficult knowledge (Pitt & Britzman, 2003), and of becoming more than perfect strangers (Dion, 2009) to Indigenous peoples and histories.

We link this work to what Giroux has termed “a pedagogy of public memory” which is “about making connections that are often hidden, forgotten, or wilfully ignored” (2004, p. 68). In consideration of how long it has taken for the truth of Canadian and colonial history to come to light, we feel this type of public memory is a crucial aspect of the ways in which our installation will function within our faculty. Not only is our pedagogical approach public, it is also political. The intention of the pedagogy being utilised is to enact Giroux’s concern for connecting “understanding with the issue of social responsibility” as part of our teaching responsibility “to educate students not only to engage [with] the world critically” (2004, p. 72), but to act on what they learn. Giroux centres his discussion of public pedagogy in the area of cultural studies where he primarily works. We take his point about the unending nature of the “project of democratic social transformation” (2004, p. 76).

In part, we draw inspiration for this public pedagogical approach from the work of arts educational theorists John Dewey and Maxine Greene. In considering art as experience, Dewey (1934) gets to the heart of its pedagogical potential by suggesting that

... it is when the desires and aims, the interests and modes of response of another become an expansion of our own being that we understand him (sic). We learn to see with his eyes, hear with his ears, and their results give true instruction, for they are built into our own structure. (p. 350)

That is, art has the power to transform our perspectives through our interactions with it; in this light, a public display of thousands of tiny orange shirts created by thousands of contributors offers tremendous pedagogical potential. This work can also meet what Greene (1995, p. 65) suggests is the prerogative of educators: “we teachers must so emphasise the importance of persons becoming reflective enough to think about their own thinking and become conscious of their own consciousness”. This is a heavy responsibility that we must take up not only as teacher educators, but which we must also inspire in our students so that they might inspire it in their students.

Knitting as a Private/Public Pedagogy

Knitting is a process and product orientated skill (Strawn, 2012). Kargól (2021) describes three benefits of knitting. She identifies knitting is a social activity in that family members and friends can be the first source of inspiration and induction into knitting. Knitting groups and online communities offer ongoing connection and opportunity for problem solving, refinement of technique and extension of skills. It can be undertaken as solitary or communal activity (Corkhill et al., 2014; Jou et al., 2021; Kelly, 2014; Robertson, 2011). A second focus by Kargól (2021) is on knitting as a way to engage thought. With a focus on hands combined with repetition means that knitting becomes mediative and offers a symbolic value to end product. Corkhill et al. (2014) describe knitting as having a “rhythmic and sensory nature, which can be calming, with potential meditative and therapeutic qualities” (p. 36). The knitter is required to perform repetitive tasks that can be complex to produce varied and creative products. Lastly Kargól (2021) sees knitting as a creative endeavour seen within everyday life. It is a particular type of creativity that privileges the process rather than the result. Phillips (2013) notes possibilities for a symbiotic relationship between the knitter and the material. Engaging with knitting as activity offers an intrinsic reward for the knitter/creator (Clarke, 2016) rather than relying on affirmation or judgement from others.

Knitting has been utilised beyond the pragmatic process for producing a garment or household item. Phillips (2013) notes that while knitting was a homey pastime, it was both a creative and re-creative art form. Turney (2009) has described knitting as both art and craft, utilising design to create fashion and performance that is done in context of everyday living. Its accessible features make it readily accessible to amateurs and craftspeople as well artists and designers. Yet in spite of this, hand knitting is largely ignored or relegated to an outdated past. It is judged as being uninteresting and ordinary and Strawn (2012) notes knitting has been viewed as women’s work. Phillips makes the claim that “it was nearly always a woman who wielded the needles” (2013, p. 9). However, there are different positions on this, such as Desmarais (2020) writing about men engaging in knitting practices and refuting perceptions of knitting as a wholly feminine endeavour, and Beyer (2022) writing about how the COVID-19 pandemic has enabled a resurgence in men engaging with needlework.

Kelly (2014) has considered how knitting can be seen as a feminist project. Whether undertaken by women and men as a craft or hobby, knitting creates a space for contestation and subversion about femininities and masculinities. Feminists have also claimed knitting as a project undertaken by all genders and as a way to challenge the disconnection between public and private domains (Groeneveld, 2010; Kelly, 2014), and that knitting as a community offers possibilities for a collective identity and action. Clarke remarks on how “Knitting and craft have a long history, the meanings of which are constantly changing” (2016, p. 304) yet the practices and techniques persist. In context of family, knitting was a pastime that produced necessary everyday clothing such as sweaters, socks and hats (Phillips (2013, p. 5). The task of knitting clothing and household items has not been an activity for all women with Strawn, (2012) noting that exploitative employment practices (Farinosi, 2021) have meant knitting has been coercively undertaken by enslaved women and those trying to earn while living in poverty.

Groeneveld (2010) describes how knitting has been utilised as a political statement. These range from supporting troops or enacting anti-war protests to knitting as a way to raise funds for charity. Clarke describes how knitted protest banners are evident on site but they also incorporate those not in attendance but who contributed to the knitting. Knitting in protest is seen as a safe form of protest because it is perceived as non-confrontational (Kelly, 2014; Robertson, 2011). Women knitting while on sites of protest argue that “the politics of feminism could be worked out through action rather than theory” (Robertson, 2011, p. 190). However, this position is in diametrical contrast to radical feminists who have been much more willing to be confrontational have rejected images of protesting women knitting as “inimical to feminist goals” (Robertson, 2011, p. 190). In her description of *The Knitting Nannas* (see <https://knitting-nannas.com>), Kelly (2014) notes how their peaceful protests are also disruptive as they “bear witness to the war against those who try to rape our land and divide our communities” (n.p.).

As a counter-hegemonic discourse knitting has been used to express feelings and reactions to socio-political circumstances. Yarn-bombing is utilised to instigate a form of activism or what Springgay (2010) calls “knitivism”. Yarn-bombing exploits the underlying assumption of innocence associated with knitted art while drawing on a gentleness of knitting to unite (Farinosi & Fortunati, 2018). The first yarn bombing has been attributed to Magda Sayeg (Haveri, 2016) and as another textile artist has commented, “no-one knits for hate, you knit for love most of the time” (cited in Farinosi & Fortunati, 2018, p. 139). Goggin (2015) observes that yarn bombing is unexpected, in location and regarding common understandings of appropriateness since “clothing outdoor ‘things’ in yarn disrupts the domestic use of yarn and the public use of space” (p. 96). In this powerful incongruence the “the actions and initiatives are disruptive because they challenge the status quo” (Farinosi & Fortunati, 2018, p. 157). Yarn-bombing invites reflection.

Following an earthquake that severely damaged L’Aquila, a town located in central Italy large numbers of the population were forcibly removed to outer areas of the town. According to Baldini and Pietrucci (2017) this relocation was argued as being necessary for safety purposes; however, it disrupted people’s sense of connection to their neighbours and community and disconnected them from the patterns and supports within their everyday life. In response to a lack of agency, citizens engaged in a grassroots movement to express their concerns utilising yarn-bombing or yarn graffiti (Baldini & Pietrucci, 2017; Farinosi & Fortunati, 2018). According to Goggin (2015) yarn bombing is an example of protest and also a way to lay claim to rhetorical citizenship through participation in civic life.

In their paper Corkhill et al. (2014) focus on knitting as a means for contributing to wellbeing with social benefits. More than an innocent pastime Corkhill et al. posit that knitting has benefits both psychologically and socially. Following an earthquake in Japan that affected the city of Shichigahama in Miyagi Prefecture a knitting project was started as a way to bring together survivors and manage their mental health and wellbeing (Jou et al., 2021). The project offered benefits to the knitters as it enabled a shared space where they could be with others who were experiencing similar experiences and stress after the event. By engaging with knitting as both a creative and mindful activity the knitters found mental respite during a traumatic time. The knitting was also purposeful beyond the social and mental needs of the knitters as their engagement provided an opportunity to demonstrate concern and care of others. What the knitters produced included clothing and blankets for the survivors who had lost so much. Corkhill et al. have remarked about how “knitting for those who are more vulnerable and, in more need, than oneself can change a knitter’s perspective on the world. Wrapping someone else up in something warm and cozy is symbolic of caring for others” (2014, p. 40).



Figure 1 Orange Shirts 1 (Author's own image)

The Orange Shirt Project (n.d.) was developed at the end of 2021 to acknowledge the impact of residential school in Indigenous people in Canada. The initiating circumstance for founders was the discovery of 211 unmarked graves at the sight of the former Tk'emlúps te Secwépemc Indian Residential School. It was the first of many such discoveries that followed throughout western Canada, significantly altering the total number of children who succumbed in Indian Residential Schools and never made it home first established by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in 2015. The project was not to produce items to wear nor was it to cover elements within the outdoor public space under the cover of darkness. It was a protest about the unethical practices associated with Residential Schools in Canada and the deliberate concealing of the deaths of over 7000 children as of February 2022. It was a statement of support for those communities whose children never returned and the ongoing trauma of those who did survive. Engaging in the knitting of the orange sweaters offered a way to be mindful of “the loss and pain experienced by Indigenous people while looking towards a healing” and to “to witness the truth ... and then begin to live reconciliation” (Orange Shirt Project, n.p.).



Figure 2 Orange Shirts 2 (Author's own image)

The Tiny Orange Sweater Project (see <https://www.facebook.com/groups/328077959023299/>) was initiated by Jennifer Kent Symons in the Summer of 2021 through a posting on social media (Facebook), and quickly gained traction. Our version of this project will be positioned in the Faculty of Education at the University of British Columbia, Canada where we feel it will offer maximal potential for both curricular and pedagogical connection. In the early stages of the project, we held workshops with students from NITEP (UBC's Indigenous teacher education program) and other students in both teacher education and graduate courses. Opportunities were provided on campus during lunchtimes to collect yarn, but also sit in a shared space to knit. Beginners were able to get instructions and coaching from more experienced knitters and crocheters. A website was then developed that not only provided background about the project,

but also offers patterns for making including knitting, crocheting, beading and sewing. The website also offers a record of where in the world donations have come from, including Ireland, the United States, and Australia.



Figure 3 Orange Shirts 3 (Author's own image)

Academics, administrative staff, and students became involved in the project and frequently commented on the powerful impact of the growing collection of tiny orange sweaters on the countertop in the reception area of the Teacher Education Office. Preservice teachers in the Bachelor of Education programs were able to engage their students with the project while out on their teaching practicums and brought back sweaters created by students in their practicum schools from across the Lower Mainland Region of British Columbia. Contributions will continue to be collected after the official installation launch, set to coincide with Canada's National Day for Truth and Reconciliation, so that subsequent graduating classes will also have the opportunity to participate and contribute to the installation. All of this work has been facilitated by a small grant from the Faculty of Education, which provided funding for the installation of a wall of little orange sweaters. At the time of our writing, more than 300 sweaters have been collected, each of which represents approximately 1 to 2 hours of creation time, making it clear why the goal of 7000 sweaters is aspirational and may take several years to achieve. This in no way diminishes the intent and impact of the project, however, and instead extends its temporal influence over several years and several graduating classes.

The Pedagogy of Hands Back, Hands Forward

One of the best known Musqueam teachings frequently evoked in our institution is the principle of hands back, hands forward. The late Musqueam Elder Vince Stogan shared this teaching with Dr Jo-Ann Archibald who wrote about it in her 2008 book, *Indigenous Storywork*, and often shares it in her public speaking engagements. It has now been taken up by many of our colleagues, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous, because of the power it holds and the responsibility it conveys:

My dear ones ... Form a circle and join hands in prayer. In joining hands, hold your left palm upward to reach back to grasp the teachings of the ancestors. Put these teachings into your everyday life and pass them on. Hold your right palm downward to pass these teachings on to the younger generation. In this way, the teachings and knowledge of the ancestors continue, and the circle of human understanding and caring grows stronger. (Tsimilano, as cited in Archibald, 2008, p. 50)

This teaching offers an apt and tangible representation of the way in which knowledge flows through us all; with one hand we receive knowledge from those before us and with the other we have the duty to share that knowledge with those coming after us.

This is perhaps at the heart of The Orange Shirt Project - through it, we hope to share the burden of Indian Residential Schools with those who have lived through the traumas they held. And in manifesting that burden through this collaborative creative work, we hope to share the weight of that burden with all who encounter it. It is an act of reverence, remembrance, respect and responsibility. It is an act of humility and of hope, a call to allyship, and acknowledgement of Indigenous survivance and presence. We are grateful to those who inspired us to this work, and those providing funding to support it. We are grateful to those who have contributed to it, and we hope that all of our work together honours all those whose loss of life, or loss of dignity and innocence, is represented in each tiny orange shirt. We cannot undo what is done, but we can work to ensure such things are never done again.



Figure 4 Orange Shirts 4 (Author's own image)

We give the final word to Greene (1995 as cited in Kohli, 2018, p. 195) who reminds us that “meaning happens in and by means of an encounter with a painting, with a text, with a dance performance” (p. 139, emphasis in original). We hope that meaning will continue to happen as students engage with our installation work in the years to come.

Biographies

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Kerry Renwick co-ordinates the home economics education program at UBC, a teaching specialisation whose content and practice are inherently linked to building and sustaining respectful relationships. Her research focuses on social justice in context of K-12 educational settings.

Kerry's previous research includes health promoting schools; exploring the relationship between school gardens and mental health in youth; and teachers' practice in health and food education. She is currently the Principal Investigator on a SSHRC Partnership Development grant focused on global food literacy education. The Food Literacy International Partnership (FLIP) includes Deakin University, Australia; Sweet Briar College, USA; and Gothenburg University, Sweden.

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