Conversations That Include: Workshopping Inclusivity in the Department of Education

Rhonda Chung, Amanda Dunbar & Walcir Cardoso
Concordia University

Conversations are how we build relationships with one another. The importance of conversations has been attested across timelines and geographies, from Socratic methods in ancient Greece to tribal knowledge-keeping in present-day Aotearoa among the Māori (Smith, 2021). Ecological learning theories view conversations as communicative acts, which connect individuals to the multiple socio-ecosystems they frequent—from the microsystem of the classroom and home to the macrosystems of society at large; nurturing such relationships sustains communities and the individual's moral stances (van Lier, 2011). The role of education programs is to facilitate ethical conversations between these nested ecosystems, facilitating mutual learning and relationship-building (Bhattacharya, 2021). Teacher training programs, in particular, use dialogue-based externalization techniques as a key component of teacher-reflection activities, enabling practitioners to voice their teaching beliefs with other like-minded professionals, resulting in professional development (Farrell, 2022).

In this Special Issue, we discuss the proceedings of the Conversations that Include online workshop series organized by representatives in Concordia's Department of Education Interdisciplinary Graduate Students Association (DOEIGSA) and funded by Concordia's Experiential Learning Grant. Five workshops are featured in-depth, each designed around the theme of inclusivity, and provide materials that can be used in the classroom.

"CONVERSATIONS THAT INCLUDE" WORKSHOP SERIES

Our interactive workshop series, Conversations that Include, was developed through supportive conversations with graduate students and DOEIGSA representatives. In 2021, DOEIGSA conducted two surveys among undergraduate and graduate students to identify what aspects of equity, diversity, and inclusivity (EDI) were missing from their educational experiences in the Department of Education (DOE). Among the needs identified by students, many of whom are pre-service and in-service teachers, were: being connected to "education practitioners, not only researchers" to foster more work-ready skills; wanting opportunities to "facilitate peer-to-peer mentorship" to build their professional and educational networks; and, curating a more inclusive curriculum, specifically about learning disabilities. As one graduate-level respondent shared, they had recently been diagnosed with a learning disability, and felt under-educated on this issue, despite their lengthy and diverse educational experiences. This critique underscores a current issue in Quebec schools, where one in five elementary students and one in four secondary students have been diagnosed with a special learning need–a figure that is currently on the rise (Ducharme & Magloire, 2018).

Within Canada, our understanding of what constitutes an inclusive curriculum in education is connected to research in disability studies (Whitley & Hollweck, 2020). In the Quebec Education program, special needs students are integrated into the classroom setting, but not all teachers are trained to design inclusive spaces (Ducharme & Magloire, 2018). Inclusivity involves reducing barriers that limit participation, which are often connected to historically oppressive policies based on creating normative practices related to sex, ethnic/social origin, sexuality, language, religion, economic condition, and physical and psychological ability (UNESCO, 2017). Following the results of the student surveys,

members of DOEIGSA designed and conducted Conversations that Include, an interactive workshop series centered on addressing issues like, language and ability, to promote inclusivity in the classroom.

In Winter 2021, DOEIGSA applied for and obtained an Experiential Learning grant to fund this workshop series. We specifically focused on Concordia's Strategic Directions, like Next Generation Learning, which commit to providing teaching and learning opportunities that are "more inclusive, flexible, experiential, skill-oriented, mobility-enabling and lifelong [...] to work creatively and collaboratively on our society's most complex challenges." The series also involved Concordia's objectives to Teach for Tomorrow ("deliver a next-generation education that's connected, transformative, and fit for the times"); to Mix it up ("build agile structures that facilitate intellectual mixing and internal collaboration"); and to Take Pride ("celebrate successes and be purposeful about building a legacy") in our membership with the DOE.

This workshop series, and the Special Issue that stems from it, provide a road map for future student-led initiatives in Concordia's DOE, whose staff, faculty, and student members have explicitly stated in their [Commitment to Equity, Diversity, and Inclusion](#) that the "oppressive effects of historical and current systems include structures, behaviours and attitudes which are inequitable, exclusionary, biased, discriminatory, and self-sustaining" and have vowed to "resist [these oppressive] systems… and to work towards transforming our department and our university into more equitable and inclusive spaces."

THE WORKSHOP SERIES

Format

Ensuring learners have access to a barrier-free education is not just an objective for classroom activities, but must also form part of a "de/colonizing" effort in education, involving "decentering the western [...] rules of engagement," which include the normative practices that created many of these barriers to begin with (Bhattacharya, 2021, p. 11). To this end, the workshop series offered either: (a) pedagogical innovations, enabling attendees to create and develop inclusive activities for immediate classroom use; or (b) teacher reflection activities, inviting attendees to think differently about a particular sociopolitical subject, and included

concrete methods/activities to bring this thinking into their classroom. To ensure cohesiveness across workshops, all workshop leaders were provided with a checklist (see Appendix A), supporting them in making their learning objectives clear, defining what inclusivity means in their field, and observing aspects of universal design for their presentation. In keeping with the stated needs of the DOE students, all workshops were designed to be hands-on and facilitate peer-to-peer interaction, meaning that workshop leaders were expected to provide interactive material for attendees, either through dialogue, task creation, or an arts-based activity.

Workshop Leaders

Lana F. Zeaiter's (McGill University) pedagogical innovation workshop was entitled "The Why and How of Fostering Plurilingual Identities." It offered strategies for putting theoretical aspects of plurilingualism into practice using an identity web, and a poem by Agha Shahid Ali related to the theme of identity. These identity tasks, Lana explains, encourage both English-language teachers and their students to acknowledge and value the diversity of learners' linguistic repertoires.

Lynn Jammal's (Concordia University) teacher reflection workshop was entitled "Indie Video Games as Pedagogical Tools for Community Care." Participants played and discussed indie games on itch.io through a trauma-informed perspective, with the goal of promoting inclusion in the classroom through a model of community care and protection for members of marginalized groups.

Chloé Collins' (Cégep Édouard-Montpetit) pedagogical innovation workshop was entitled "Exploring the Implications of Translanguaging in a Real-World Quebec Gen-Z Context." It focused on an ESL activity enabling learners to explore translanguaging from authentic sources and encouraged discussion of the socio-political implications of the globalization of English and French. The workshop's structure encouraged participants to interact with one another in order to listen to, understand, and better include diverse perspectives in their teaching.

Ezgi Ozyonum's (Concordia University) teacher reflection workshop was entitled "Learning to Decolonize through Students' Sovereignty." Participants worked on unpacking biases in curriculum and pedagogy and reflected on ways to decolonize syllabi. The workshop aimed to promote decolonial approaches to teaching and learning in

higher education by mobilizing educators and students as active change-makers.

Laura Pareja Conto's (Concordia University) teacher reflection workshop was entitled "How Can We Respond to Harm in Schools Without Perpetuating Further Harm?" The dialogue-based workshop explored ways that instructors can address how harm manifests in educational settings, and discussed accountability strategies through the lenses of retributive, transformative, and restorative approaches to justice.

Bojana Krsmanovic's (Concordia University) pedagogical innovation workshop was entitled "Creating Accessible Academic Posters." She presented strategies and suggestions for applying concepts of Universal Design for Learning to posters, visual aids, and print media in the classroom to make them accessible to all learners, particularly those with visual and other print-based disabilities.

The remaining five workshop leaders and their materials are featured in this Special Issue. Each author also served as a Peer Reviewer for at least one manuscript. External Peer Reviews by graduate students from outside the series were also solicited. Each contributor formatted their final version to COPAL's template, which was updated to include Alt-text guidelines (this information was obtained from Concordia's accessibility centre).

Jennifer Burton's (University of Toronto) pedagogical innovation workshop focused on translanguaging pedagogies among multilingual English language learners. Jennifer uses spoken word poetry as her form of research inquiry, noting that it "allows students to be creative, playing with language without adherence to standard grammar (Dooley, 2014), and situates their lived experiences at the center of curriculum, positioning them as experts in their own stories." Moreover, Jennifer states that "supporting the linguistic and cultural diversity in [...] language learning classrooms [...] valorizes multilingual learners' distinct identities, languages and experiences, and challenges monolingual language ideologies and print-based literacy practices in schools."

Rhonda Chung and Willem-Loup Chung Arsenault's (Concordia University) teacher reflection workshop centered on land-sensitive teacher reflection activities for language instructors based on tasks piloted with her son, Willem-Loup, for Cycle One of Québec's Education Program. Rhonda's arts-based autobiographical Landguaging portrait technique facilitates "reflexive weaving in and out of macro/microsystems" in the socioecological environment, enabling teachers to "develop ethical relationships" with the lands where their language teaching and learning

occur. Such actions allow instructors to confront how these linguistic relationships may be "autochthonous, allochthonous or parautochthonous" to the land they live and practice on.

John Wayne dela Cruz's (McGill University) pedagogical innovation workshop spotlighted the affordances of teaching and assessing plurilingually, which he maintains is "not simply an act, but a stance [to] explicitly promote linguistically inclusive and culturally responsive practices in teaching." John provides guidance on "how to draw from the CEFR and its descriptors to design tasks and evaluate student performance in a way that recognizes additional language learners as competent language users, and that challenges native speakerism and deficit framings" in language education.

Alina Gutierrez's (Concordia University) teacher reflection workshop described "three different ways visual notes can be used in the learning process [to] help diverse learners better understand and connect with content" in the classroom environment. Alina has used visual notes with diverse learner groups, including second language learners, students with learning disabilities, and those who are hard of hearing.

April Passi's (McGill University) pedagogical innovation workshop sheds light on translingual approaches to teaching literacy, which she contends "strengthen student voices and enable [them] to resist monolingual ideologies [and] give students the opportunity to craft a personally meaningful text." Ultimately, April's approach focuses on developing and prioritizing learners' pride in their communicative repertoire over grammatical correctness.

Running the Workshop Series

Funds from the Experiential Learning grant and DOEIGSA's budget were disbursed to each workshop leader, the workshop series project leader, and a poster designer/media outreach administrator. Posters were distributed through the DOE's email listserv and via social media with a link to register for events. Attendees received two reminder emails with a Zoom link; one 48-hours before the event, and the other the morning of the event. Each workshop ran from 60 to 90 minutes. After the online event, attendees received an email with resources discussed in the workshop and a link to an anonymous feedback form; those results were later forwarded to each workshop leader.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR FUTURE WORKSHOP SERIES

Implementing EDI and decolonization (EDID)-sensitive conversations in hierarchized higher education settings often proves problematic (Stein & Andreotti, 2016). Bringing the voice of student-led initiatives into university settings, where faculty and province-led initiatives dominate, is one way to mitigate power differentials. However, unlike faculty and staff who participate in EDID initiatives during working hours, student involvement constitutes unpaid labour. Given these initiatives are ultimately designed to meet student needs, student representatives should be remunerated for their involvement. Therefore, to encourage regular student engagement, paid representative positions should be offered by the Department for both their undergraduate and graduate populations that involve cluster hiring to avoid student isolation and burnout (Madzima & MacIntosh, 2021).

Since student engagement legitimizes the value of EDID, regularly conducting surveys is one method of capturing the evolving needs of enrolled students and organizing relevant initiatives. Engaging with survey results in a timely manner is paramount to ensuring that student needs are met; outcomes that are late in implementation, ultimately fail to serve the population that was first surveyed. In order to promote EDID values, however, Departments must make clear statements about how they define each issue, and make specific goals regarding how they will run the microsystems of their classrooms to align with these macrosystem values. Without such explicit statements and concrete goals, good faith relationships between dominant and marginalized groups cannot take root. Several recommendations are provided below for future student-led EDID initiatives.

Frequency

If the student-led team is small (one to two members), consider running EDID events on a monthly basis. Because of funding constraints, two DOEIGSA members had only the summer semester to run the entirety of the series, a time of year when most graduate students are not typically engaged in university-based activities. We, therefore, suggest running monthly workshops over the Fall and Winter semesters to attract attention from a higher number of enrolled students, thereby increasing the chances of robust attendance and interaction. Monthly workshops would have

eased the administrative challenges that arose from running 11 workshops in two months.

Mentorship and Funding

Student-led initiatives face outsized administrative, financial, and time-based barriers within the structure of the university that could be avoided or mitigated through greater planning and increased involvement by multiple stakeholders within the university. For example, faculty and staff could proactively post university funding opportunities on a designated area of the DOE website or share announcements through a calendar posted with funding deadline dates and links to the awards. To further increase visibility, faculty could also discuss these funding opportunities in class, making transparent the resources available at the departmental and university levels. Faculty and staff could also offer mentorship in writing grant proposals, and in navigating the administrative red tape that often accompanies accessing university resources. This may involve creating and maintaining regular grant writing workshops throughout the semesters, which can also be headed by experienced students to enable collegial interaction and mutual support.

Outreach

Even though the online workshop series was created for undergraduate and graduate students in Concordia's Department of Education, feedback from workshop attendees included diverse education-related practitioners (researchers, instructors, pedagogical counselors, and instructional designers) from areas across the province and the globe, including Spain, Ghana, and Pakistan. Such online events demonstrate the potential global reach of such workshops, but also connect the DOE's undergraduate and graduate students to diverse groups of practitioners, which they requested in the surveys.

In feedback forms to the Experiential Learning Grant office, one workshop leader noted developing a deeper sense of global awareness because they had to take into account that their workshop might reach people of diverse cultural backgrounds outside the university setting. Another leader identified that running their workshop augmented their sense of empathy, since such attendees were expected to share their

personal experiences during reflection activities. Most workshop leaders noted that self-awareness and reflection—either on the design of their activities or on how attendees would interact with their materials—were constants during their preparation process. These moments of self-reflection are key elements in facilitating professional development (Farrell, 2022).

Given the global reach of online formats, and the organization and accessibility issues related to in-person events, we recommend continuing with virtual workshop series. We also recommend forwarding workshop posters to other student-led organizations and departments of education, particularly those with stated EDID goals, so as to increase visibility, encourage diverse participation, and promote inter-institutional bonds. Note that we distributed posters to administrators at the universities where workshop leaders were enrolled, but were at times met with resistance. For example, we were told by one administrator that we were "spamming" them. Given the hierarchical nature of universities, we thus recommend involving a faculty or staff member to leverage their credentials and forward workshop posters on the students' behalf.

Finally, workshops that revolve around stated EDID goals of the university at large, and the department in particular, should not be a student-only initiative, as this can lead to student stress, isolation, and burnout, particularly among racialized students (Gorski, 2018). For this reason (among others), EDID-initiatives, like inclusion-based workshop series, should be part of a greater commitment headed by departments, overseen by faculty, and supported by staff to ensure that equity, diversity, inclusivity, and decolonization reflect the unique characteristics of the department and the students that they are responsible for educating. We encourage acts of solidarity with undergraduate and graduate populations by providing well-organized and long-term support for student-led initiatives as part of the department's EDID goals.

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Conversations build relationships, meaning that a lack of communication can weaken social bonds (van Lier, 2004). In an ecological system, conversations ensure the health of the nested socio-ecosystems, and operate on a principle of relationality where community members understand themselves as interconnected and part of a dynamic system

(Larsen-Freeman, 2020; van Lier, 2011). This means that relationships are reciprocal, and community members seek opportunities to build trust (Kovach, 2021). To sustain relations, more permanent and core members of the DOE (i.e., faculty and staff) must facilitate regular opportunities to collaborate with student-led initiatives, fostering long-standing and respectful relationships in their shared ecosystem (see Appendix B for an overview of conducting student surveys). Such conversations imply that the DOE will make explicit what they will do with the data generated from such surveys to address Concordia's settler colonial history and current practices, and that each community member is transparent about what they can offer the initiative to ensure its future success.

The words and actions modelled in departments of education have ripple effects; these are the environments in which future educators calibrate their moral compasses, often before beginning their professional careers. Gaps in the training of pre-service and in-service teachers are a known issue in teacher education programs in Quebec, particularly regarding how to be inclusive (Ducharme & Magloire, 2018). Educators who lack training in reducing classroom barriers, therefore, may unknowingly replicate barriers, inadvertently impeding the success of certain students in their classrooms. As members of Concordia's Department of Education, we are enacting the Department's stated commitment "to resist this settler colonial system…in the path towards becoming a more equitable community, and we recognize there are practices within our system that may need to be reevaluated in the process". We hope that the proceedings of the workshop series serve to reduce education-related barriers and support future student-led EDID initiatives in our Department.

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APPENDIX A

CHECKLIST FOR WORKSHOP LEADERS

During the design of your workshop, please ensure that the following elements are addressed:

Pedagogical Innovations

Enable attendees to create and develop teaching and learning activities for immediate classroom use. Workshop leaders will provide attendees with all materials (i.e., hand-outs, pictures, etc.) needed to complete a learning activity, including an evaluation rubric.

1. Please clearly state your **Learning Objective(s)** to attendees as follows: *By the end of the workshop, attendees will be able to _____*
2. **Define** what has been the long-standing method for teaching this topic.
3. How does your activity **differ** from those traditions?
4. In what ways does your innovation lead to a more "**inclusive**" classroom (according to your stated definition)?
5. Does your activity take into account aspects of <u>Universal Design for Learning</u> and <u>accessibility</u> issues?
6. **Classroom application**: Have you included a **rubric** that shows teachers (and their students) how they could evaluate this newly learned activity?

Teacher Reflections

Engage attendees to complete interactive activities, enabling attendees to think differently about a particular learning subject. Workshop leaders will provide attendees with all materials (i.e., hand-outs, pictures, etc.) needed to complete the reflection exercises, including concrete methods/activities to bring this new knowledge into their classroom with their students.

1. Please clearly state your **Learning Objective(s)** to attendees as follows: *By the end of the workshop, attendees will be able to _____*
2. **Define** what has been the long-standing method for teaching this topic.
3. How does your reflection lead to **differing** from those traditions?
4. In what ways does your reflection lead to a more "**inclusive**" classroom (according to your stated definition)?

5. Does your activity take into account aspects of *Universal Design for Learning* and accessibility issues?

6. **Classroom application**: Have you included an **activity** that attendees could also use in their classrooms to help them dialogue about your topic with their students?

APPENDIX B

CONDUCTING STUDENT SURVEYS AND USING SURVEY DATA

Step 1 – Faculty and staff work with DOEIGSA members and undergraduate representatives (who currently do not have a representative body in the DOE) to define what EDID stands for in the DOE based on Concordia's stated EDI ideals. As stated earlier, student participation should be clustered, rather than limited to one or two members, to avoid isolation and burnout.

Step 2 – Faculty, staff, and students maintain yearly EDID surveys, which include questions related to what themes and speakers students are interested in. Previous EDID survey discussions with faculty and staff showed that data should be organized according to departments (e.g., Child Studies or Applied Linguistics), and levels (i.e., undergraduate or graduate).

Step 3 – Faculty, staff, and students could use survey results to create a workshop series or to inform the theme of the GSDE Symposium, currently supported by Concordia's Center for Teaching and Learning (CTL).

Step 4 – A call is made to undergraduate and graduate students to run the workshop series in the following semester. Preferred candidates should demonstrate familiarity with the chosen topic or experience running online events (e.g., poster creation; media outreach, etc.). DOE students can additionally be mentored by members of CTL, which runs online workshops.

Step 5 – If the DOE does not have sufficient funds to run yearly workshop series, then mentoring students to write grant proposals (e.g., Experiential Learning Grant, Faculty of Arts & Sciences Dean's Special Initiative, Concordia Council on Student Life, etc.) to access university resources could ameliorate the situation.

Additionally, the DOE could seek assistance from existing university resources and create an inter-network support. For example, queries about making the curriculum accessible should be forwarded to Concordia's

Access Centre, which runs workshops specific to Universal Design for learning. Other administrative bodies (Indigenous Directions, Black Perspectives office) and departments (e.g., First Peoples Studies, psychology) could also be contacted for educational support related to Concordia's Decolonizing and anti-Black racism commitments.