

Learnings from a Lab: Advancing reconciliation in post secondary

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Introduction

Canada's Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) underscored the central responsibility of the education sector to enable reconciliation with Indigenous communities. As agents in colonization (historically and presently) post-secondary institutions have a special responsibility to decolonize and to support reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous individuals and communities.

Since the release of the TRC Calls to Action, many postsecondary institutions have been working hard to make changes in line with these calls. However, this is difficult, emotional, and deeply complex work and there are not many widely-known examples of truly transformative work that the Calls to Action ask of the sector.

In response to this, the McConnell Foundation launched a [Social Innovation Lab for Reconciliation in the Post Secondary Sector](#) in October 2021, stewarded by Aleeya Velji, Jodi Calahoo-Stonehouse, Kelly Hodgins, Tosh Southwick, and Andrea Rodriguez.

The directive to try a social innovation lab to help college and universities advance reconciliation emerged out of three years of dialogue and listening to partners and leaders - Indigenous and non-Indigenous - across the postsecondary sector.

It was piloted in two regions, in collaboration with two postsecondary institutions through 2021-22.

In each region, a team (8-10 people) was formed, comprised of a diversity of people from within the post-secondary institutions and from the local communities. Each team also included the institution's president and Reconciliation Lead, and at least one respected Elder from the community. They were facilitated through a social innovation lab process, tailored to their context by the Stewardship Team (listed above), with the goal of developing "prototypes" that could be implemented in the region to advance reconciliation.

This paper discusses some of the important learnings from this pilot year ([Key Ingredients for a Reconciliation Lab - Part 1](#)), and shares considerations for lab practitioners and those interested in running something similar ([Readiness Tool - Part 2](#)).

We humbly note that we are continually learning and reflecting. This paper offers our thoughts as of July 2022 but is far from comprehensive. We recommend that readers do not take this paper as "prescriptive" but rather, a prompt for their thinking. We hope it can aid the reader in reflecting on their own efforts in facilitation or labs, and that they may find some of its content applicable in deepening their own practice.

Part 1: Key Ingredients for a Reconciliation Lab

Successfully creating a container of trust and connection among participants in a lab team is a critical precondition for any lab, but even more so for labs working on reconciliation. Reconciliation based labs are inherently different to other social innovation labs because they must weave together Indigenous and Western lenses throughout the lab process (and the solutions produced).

Furthermore, reconciliation lab participants come from different backgrounds and possess different worldviews, and the topic can be very sensitive or triggering. If the team is not at the right stage of readiness, they won't be able to create trust and connection, and the lab will not be successful.

We identified three key ingredients to build this container of trust:

1. Participants who are on a journey of reconciliation, learning, and unlearning

To support development of trust among participants in the lab, it is important that everyone involved has already done significant personal work on reconciliation; learning/unlearning of different biases and worldviews; and have developed an understanding of themselves in connection to the lab topic.

2. Shared leadership

While the choice of team members will depend on the lab topic and region, every lab should minimally include participation by a respected elder from the community in the region, the college or university's Reconciliation Lead, and the President or other senior leader of the institution. These individuals work side-by-side, guided by the facilitator(s) to run a lab.

3. The right facilitators

Facilitators will guide the team, and so they need to be experts on the social innovation lab process. In addition, though, they must be deeply sensitive to power dynamics, traumas, histories, and the values of those participating in the lab.

The social innovation lab process can be applied to the goal of advancing reconciliation in postsecondary institutions and have good outcomes, but only if the team is at a certain stage of readiness. Below, we discuss these three key ingredients in more detail, including how to assess "readiness" for each.

Part 2: Readiness Tool

Lab organisers must understand that each participant, institution, setting, and set of relationships are at different stages of readiness to participate in a lab process.

Read on for considerations on how to assess readiness of a team that wants to run a lab.

1. Participants who have already done significant personal work on reconciliation, learning, and unlearning

When selecting participants to make up the lab team, it is critical to know where potential participants are at in their personal reconciliation journey. Typically, the more self-work, learning, and unlearning that a person has done, the more prepared they will be to engage in the lab.

Non-Indigenous participants should have a nuanced and compassionate understanding of colonisation and Indigenous history in Canada. To what degree have the participants gotten to this point already? If you are in doubt, consider requiring that participants do some preparatory activities (reading, writing, films, discussions, the [Kairos Blanket Exercise](#)). Or, because this journey can take a person many years, you might consider inviting different participants, who are further along in their path of learning and unlearning.

Indigenous participants should understand the college/university's efforts so far on reconciliation, Indigenization and/or decolonization, as well as the relationship between the college/university and the Indigenous communities in the region. In some cases, the communities may not be supported by the institution. Revealing this will support how all participants understand each other and the context of the institution within the lab process.

You might ask questions that query:

- *What previous work have you done on understanding your relationship to reconciliation?*
- *How ready do you feel to share your journey in this process?*

2. Shared Leadership

Uniquely, this model of lab requires participation by the President, Reconciliation Lead and Elder - all of whom are leaders in their own right. Thus, the lab requires that authority be shared, and that each of these individuals bring forward their leadership and wisdom at different points. It is a delicate dance that requires respect, friendship and trust.

Through the lab process these leaders will take on emotional work and oftentimes find themselves pushing the team into newly-realised futures. The work requires that these leaders have their own support in place (such as community elders or teachers) to help them navigate through the process and bring the lab team to a place of solutions.

Is your leadership team ready to work together, ask the hard questions, and push the institution to the next level?

To assess that, you might ask questions that query:

- *What is the deeper motivation for the leaders to undertake this work at an institutional level?*
- *What would you like the future of the institution to look like when reconciliation is alive?*
- *Are all layers of leadership connected, aligned in terms of values, and able to work together?*

A note on shared values:

While the strength of a lab is that it brings together people with various ideas and perspectives, each team needs to have a degree of alignment around the ultimate *destination*.

To assess that, you might ask questions of potential participants and of the leadership to determine:

- *Do the institution and all members on the team agree that in principle, Indigenous communities should be able to have say in what happens at the institution?*
- *Do the institution and all members of the team share the overarching value that reconciliation is possible in postsecondary?*

These are some core, necessary values with which your team needs to be aligned. If these clash, then the lab will not be productive for anybody.

3. The Right Facilitators

Naturally, facilitators must have a strong grasp on social innovation lab approaches (human-centred design and systems thinking). However, supporting a lab that takes a reconciliation focus requires a few more skills.

Does your lab facilitator demonstrate a strong ability to listen, and a humility to take cues from the President, Reconciliation Lead and Elders involved in the team?

Have they facilitated groups comprised of diverse cultures and worldviews? It is critical that they be deeply sensitive to power dynamics, traumas, histories and values of those participating in the lab.

Furthermore, a good facilitator will have the reflex to stop and make time for ceremony and land-based and somatic practices throughout the lab process, recognizing the importance of balance between the mind, body, and spirit. If the facilitator is non-Indigenous, is someone involved in the lab who has a deep understanding of the culture and traditions of the local communities and is willing to guide the lab to follow proper protocols? If they are willing and able to play a co-lead role with the facilitator, this will ensure that the lab is able to weave Indigenous and Western approaches.

Finally, facilitators must understand (or be willing to learn about) the context of the postsecondary institution and the Indigenous territory in which the lab is situated.

To assess the readiness of a potential facilitator, you might ask questions that query:

- *What types of skill sets and capacities the facilitators bring to this work? (look for process expertise coupled with understanding of Indigenous worldviews)*
- *Do the facilitators have the capacity for a long-term commitment to the institution as lab processes can take time?*

Assessing Readiness

Before undertaking a social innovation lab, the host or stewardship team is strongly encouraged to do a readiness check. You could send out a survey, or invite an interview that asks key questions, such as the ones we suggest here. The examples we share are examples, but we recommend you make your questions specific to the institutional and regional context.

Teams that have the key ingredients in place can move forward with a social innovation lab. This type of lab focuses on sense-making and prototyping with a focus on solutions that can be easily adopted and integrated into an institutional context. A social innovation lab requires a high readiness of participants, facilitators, and leadership.

If the readiness is medium, consider running a **social lab process** focused on relationship building and inner work. In contrast to a **social innovation lab that focuses on prototype development**, a social lab focuses on relationship building as the outcome.

Part 3: Fostering Trust and Connection

If you do a readiness assessment and determine you are in a good place to commence a lab, great! Now, design the lab process with the following considerations in mind, and you will have the most success in fostering a strong, cohesive team

Focus on Friendship

The theory of change for reconciliation is building friendships.

That is: through friendship, we reveal our true identities, traumas, pains, joys, and struggles. Through friendships, people can deeply learn from one another. Much of the work in labs has relational elements that connect teams through forms of movement that bring together the head, heart, and hands in a way that balances the rational, intellectual, physical and metaphysical nature of people's thought patterns in creative and safe ways. Friendship supports the creation of the safe container that is required in a reconciliation lab process. Prioritizing this is critical in any reconciliation work!

Appreciate that there are sparkles in the tension

In lab contexts, tension is inevitable. Its presence should not divert the work. In fact, expression of emotion should be understood as important to the work, and we should make the appropriate space for this to happen. Identifying tension and speaking to it reminds participants that there is a value to tension. As long as there is a safe container set up, tension allows for participants to challenge each other respectfully, which is essential for innovation.

Don't rush the growth

A core feature of all social innovation labs is that they are animated by a diversity of participants, with different perspectives and ideas. This is the richness of labs and is what gets us to the most innovative solutions. However, it also means that if the process is rushed, participants will end up chasing different solutions rather than moving forward in a coherent and constructive way. It is a common tendency to want to jump to solutions. It is much harder to sit and engage in deliberate conversations. Patience and listening breaks down hierarchies, and moves groups to bond. This bond must come before building meaningful solutions. Yet in labs, we always feel pressed for time, wanting to move fast. Reconciliation labs work well when we slow down, wanting to “get it right” not “get it done”. Again the need for effective facilitators is what moves groups through this part.

Learn/unlearn about the regional and institutional history and context

Learning and unlearning about each other generates respect and allows participants to better empathise and communicate with one another. Through this understanding it becomes easier to talk, learn, listen, and ultimately, work together constructively.

How do we see and get to know each other?

Non-Indigenous participants: In addition to having a baseline understanding of colonisation and Indigenous history in Canada, participants should do their research on the specific local communities and their histories.

Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants: Should do their research to understand what the postsecondary institution has done or has not done for the communities

For all participants, doing this research, which is specific to the context in which they will be working during the lab, helps till the soil for constructive conversations based in fact. Sharing the same understanding helps to build a cultural bridge.

Celebrate the Work

This work is hard, so remember to celebrate it.

Host ceremonies like dances or feasts (following the guidance of Indigenous leaders of your team) where you can come together and enjoy what you worked on. Showing appreciation for the participants' work will have a lasting memory. It supports closing the process in a good way and must be considered necessary to the process.