

NIIZH MANIDOOWAG

TWO-SPIRIT



This publication centres on Indigenous perspectives, specifically the voices of two-spirit people. The purpose is to engage in learning both from and with Indigenous Peoples about the historical and contemporary realities for two-spirit or Indigiqueer folx, that may also identify as 2SLGBTQ+. This resource seeks to create space for students to see themselves reflected in their classrooms, affirm their experiences, and celebrate two-spirit voices.

See the full resource along with author credits at ETFOfnmi.ca.

INTRODUCTION

In April of 2021, the *MMIWG2SLGBTQQ-IA+ National Action Plan: Final Report* was released. The report notes that the impact of colonization, specifically on the erasure of two-spirit people, directly coincides with the attempted erasure of language, culture, and traditions such as the potlatch, the Sundance, and other ceremonies. Eurocentric beliefs did not include gender identities outside of the binary. The impact of this narrowed perspective on spirituality is immeasurable. Since this time, two-spirit individuals have been further marginalized and continue to work to reclaim their identities, their hearts, and their spirits. There is an incredible amount of work to do in unlearning, and relearning about the diversity of Indigenous Peoples on Turtle Island, this resource is just one tool to support the two-spirit community in classrooms and community.

In the Spring of 2021, the *ETFO Anti-Oppressive Framework: A Primer* was released, in addition to the revised ETFO Equity Statement. The primer establishes “common terminology, proactive strategies, and accessible tools to further develop understanding. ETFO is committed to removing individual and systemic barriers in order to allow members to feel safer and fully participate in their workspaces.” This resource models the process for taking an anti-oppressive approach and applying it to the work being done everyday. In this resource, two-spirit voices will be centred and space created to explore ways in which people can better unpack their own biases, power, and privilege to create a more inclusive learning/working environment moving forward.

WHY DO WE LIST 2S FIRST IN THE ACRONYM?

Harlan Pruden, addresses this question in the article, *Visibility Matters: Listing of Two spirit and/or Indigenous First* (2017). Indigenous Peoples are the First Peoples on Turtle Island. Contextualized in this way, two-spirit, Indigenous Peoples have a history that predates non-Indigenous identities. Two-Spirit individuals, Elders and knowledge keepers are working to reclaim, restore, and revitalize pre-contact, nation-specific teachings, roles and responsibilities.

“The Two Spirit movement is about the reclaiming and restoring of traditional Indigenous ways, while challenging the western (foreign) frameworks, concepts, or identities of LGBTQIA.”*

– Pruden, 2017

Resisting a definition of the term Two-Spirit ‘Two-Spirit’ (i.e., two spirit, 2-Spirit, 2S) is an English term originating from a vision experienced by Dr. Myra Laramee in 1990. The term, two-spirit was introduced, and adopted at an LGBTQ+ gathering in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Some resources state that activist Albert McLeod coined the term in 1990, but it was Myra who the vision first came to, “having the ability to be neutral through the lens of having both feminine and masculine spirit.” The term two-spirit has a diverse range of expressions, depending on the individual, community, cultural, or linguistic context. The English term is a translation of the Anishinaabemowin term, niizh manidoowag (niizh-two, manidoo-spirit) which refers to a person who embodies both masculine and feminine spirits. However, different nations and cultures offer definitions and understandings, in a variety of languages, to capture meanings of the variety of

pre-colonial, complex roles of two-spirit people. There is no one way to prescribe usage of the term. To try and encapsulate all that is included in the translation from an Indigenous language to English is limiting. For example, some Indigenous Peoples may use the term to identify sexual orientation while others may use it to indicate an embodiment of two spirits (masculine and feminine), and still others may identify with all of the above, or another more culturally specific understanding. In this way, it is clear that any discussion of the multiple, complex meanings of the concept two-spirit must be Indigenous-centred, nation specific, while grounded in Indigenous worldviews, ways of knowing and being. Additionally, an understanding of any meaning of two-spirit is both deeply personal and individual, and grounded in cultural context. It needs to be explicitly stated, **the term two-spirit is specific to Indigenous Peoples only.**

As stated above, there is no one way to define the term two-spirit. Two-Spirit people and their roles predate colonial impositions, expectations, and assumptions of sex, gender, and sexual orientation. Where colonial worldviews often frame concepts as linear, compartmentalized, categorical, and hierarchical, Indigenous worldviews tend to be understood as non-linear, reciprocal, (w)holistic, relational, and independent of Eurocentric perspectives and framings. **As such, identifying as two-spirit is a decolonizing act of resistance in and of itself.**

Historically, and traditionally, two-spirit people assumed a variety of important roles within their communities. For example, two-spirit people may be mediators, medicine people, healers, social workers, or land protectors. The role of a two-spirit person varied amongst different nations and communities; however, across nations, these roles were consistently highly valued and considered as gifts to the people who embodied them.

According to Indigenous scholar Harlan Pruden (Nēhiyo/Cree), two-spirit is an organizing strategy which can be used to “...organize the Indigenous Peoples of Turtle Island who embody diverse sexualities, gender identities, roles and/or



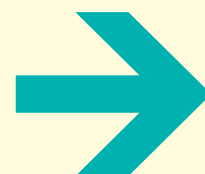
ILLUSTRATIONS BY ASHLEY MOREAU

expressions...”¹ and who may or may not exclusively identify with western conceptualizations of gender and/or sexual orientation. They assert that two-spirit is a gender analysis, as opposed to a sexual orientation analysis, although two-spirit can refer to gender, sexual orientation, or both. It is also described as a concept and not an identity for some, signaling the necessity to understand its meaning on an individual level and within a specific cultural context. As is the legacy of Eurocentricity, this colonial perception/framing of traditional two-spirit people permeated colonial policies and practices, including the residential school system, which served to assimilate or eradicate Indigenous ways of being. As is the case with many traditional, historical, Indigenous ways of knowing that have been intentionally interrupted and

forcefully silenced, the advent of the term two-spirit offered an opportunity for sovereignty, to reclaim and reconnect with traditional understandings of these valuable, gifted roles within society as determined by the community and the person.

“It is sacred and is more than just words – it is a spirit/heart language (if you know what I mean). When Two-Spirit is used it invokes our sacredness and reminds us that we have always been here, and we will be always be here. As a result, with Two-Spirit comes a great responsibility, to those who use it, as we walk and work in a sacred way with and for our people.”

– Dr. Myra Laramée



UNPACKING IMPLICIT BIAS

As education teams continue to work towards creating safer and more inclusive spaces, we need to continue to examine our own implicit biases. Everyone has implicit biases, and only by developing an awareness of oneself are we able to step into unlearning, unpacking, and appreciating the necessity of having an anti-oppressive lens towards the work that happens in a classroom or community.

A starting point when unpacking your own implicit bias is to seek opportunities with people who are already engaged in the work of anti-racism and anti-oppression. Book clubs and podcasts within professional networks, are made up of communities of educators, education workers, and non-Indigenous people working on understanding their lens and positionality in the world. Participating in book discussions aimed specifically at anti-racism, anti-oppression, Indigenous Education and Truth and Reconciliation are growing in popularity and provide the opportunity for deep discussions, learning, and ongoing unlearning.

It is important in **Addressing and Challenging Implicit Biases**, to recognize one's own unconscious use of language, longstanding beliefs, and assumptions, and then to take one step further, and interrupt these behaviours. This work falls solely on the person looking to create change. It requires oneself to immerse themselves in opportunities for conversation, education, and changed behaviours moving forward.

Questions for consideration are:

1. How are we intentional in providing opportunities for students and groups to identify and interrogate their own implicit biases?
2. Are we addressing issues that arise in the classroom equitably?



In looking at oneself, it is important to question what biases one holds towards two-spirit people. Do I have pre-conceived ideas based on stereotypes, misinformation, or religious beliefs? Am I approaching my reflections with honesty and humility so that I can unlearn and do better?

Christianity and colonization impacted two-spirit people greatly. Indigenous communities are not immune to the discrimination of two-spirit people, this discrimination happens both inside and outside of Indigenous communities. The residential school system and Christianization of Indigenous communities indoctrinated values that forced children into binary boxes, stripping them of their teachings, gifts, and the legacy of ancestors' contributions to communities and history. Historically, two-spirit people were warriors, healers, artists, active members in the community and respected, today, they continue to reclaim these positions. Colonization and first contact with the rigid understandings of gender, sexuality, and spirituality, instigated the vilification of the two-spirit identity and ways of being. Above all, this is compounded by their Indigeneity. A person's journey to reclaim their identities, complicated by the trauma of residential school, intergenerational legacies, racism, and discrimination, is not an easy one.

Highlighting two-spirit people in communities today, is essential for others to see beyond the trappings of binary thinking, stereotypes, and misunderstandings. Barbara Bruce, an entrepreneur, academic and Michif speaker, shares their experience in business while incorporating their traditional teachings and ways of life. Dr. James Makokis, season seven winner on the popular TV show, *Amazing Race*, is a family physician, previous national spokesperson and presenter for a variety of events and conferences. Dr. Makokis' advocacy work focuses on Indigenous youth and Indigenous health and transgender healthcare. Just two of many examples of two-spirit leaders on Turtle Island sharing their gifts with others. Including gender diverse individuals shows potential pathways and hope for students looking forward to careers and opportunities.

As an ally, it is important to self-assess for implicit bias, acknowledge, and address it. Cultural humility is necessary and flexibility in thinking for a growth mindset. Catching oneself in the moment, or when an issue is being brought to light by another colleague or student can be difficult. But, through the practice of cultural humility, recognizing the unconscious bias in practices and acknowledging it, models for others that change is possible.



“I grew up learning to hide who I was as it was ‘safer.’ Before heading off to Kindergarten in the local English-speaking town, my grandmother told me to say that I was a French farmer so people wouldn’t bother me about being Métis - so I followed the advice - not understanding at the time the violence Indigenous Peoples experience. As I moved into my teenage years and was on the receiving end of homophobic violence I learned to hide, and unfortunately be ashamed of myself.”

– Robert D.

SUGGESTIONS FOR CULTURAL AWARENESS AND CULTURAL SENSITIVITY:

- connect with Indigenous Education Lead/Consultants in your organization or local Friendship Centre for learning opportunities being offered;
- create relationships and build and nurture these relationships over time to further create authentic partnerships for moving forward in your practice;
- engage in cultural safety training;
- participate in online cultural safety webinars, specific to two-spirit, Indigiqueer Peoples, or Online Indigenous Education courses; and

- attend local speakers’ events, two-spirit pow wows, and connect with community organizations supporting the two-spirit community locally.

THE CENTRING OF VOICES

“Intentionally creating space for oppressed and marginalized people (e.g., racialized people, women, two-spirit, lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer+ folks, Indigenous Peoples, people with disabilities) to share, contribute, lead and to be heard. This also means that dominant groups (e.g., men, white people, able-bodied, heterosexual people, etc.) might need to step back and listen more actively.”

– ETFO Anti-Oppressive Framework

A common misunderstanding with respect to centring voices, is simply to include more voices of a particular group in the space; or, by having a speaker, one can consider the box to be “checked.” These ideas are parts to the whole; individually they can appear tokenistic. True collaboration with others, and scaffolding opportunities over time can feel empowering, meaningful, and can have significant impact in the work of disrupting discrimination and oppression.

Centring voices is about creating opportunities to give space for those who have historically experienced marginalization, to be the central force.

Justice Murray Sinclair, said a child should be able to answer these questions: *“Where do I come from? Where am I going? Why am I here? Who am I?”*