

Witnessing Support Document

Overview

In this course we will use witnessing as a foundational teaching and assessment approach in our honouring diversity course. While there are a number of different approaches and conceptualizations of being a Witness that can be applied, we will primarily rely on Dakelh and Wet'suwet'en forms of Witnessing in the first half of the course and then extend to other Indigenous groups from Canada in the second half. It is critical that we resist using primarily a Western interpretation of being a Witness in our practice, as it would eliminate the decolonizing and indigenizing elements of our approach. Standard Western definitions of witnessing include: "To testify or to attest as a legal Witness. To have personal or direct cognizance of" (Merriam-Webster). The definitions used in conventional Western society typically has a legal origin and interpretation, which then limits the understanding to approaches provable and court and limited to a narrow scope. Between cultures there are drastically differing and more expansive views on the role of the Witness and we will engage in these through our weekly witnessing sessions. For example, the Coast Salish of what we now call southern British Columbia define witnessing as, "The role of a witness is to record the message of the event in their hearts and minds, and afterward, remember and validate the special occasion by carrying the message and sharing it with friends, neighbors, and community members". Upon first glance we can immediately see the difference between the legal Western definition and one Indigenous group's perspective. As mentioned previously, the course will begin by establishing local Indigenous perspectives and then expand to include other Indigenous peoples of Canada.

We know that cultures have different understandings, approaches, and practices. For example, if we were to ask multiple cultures about their immediate family, we may hear definitions that include grandparents, cousins, friends, clan members, or just parents and sibling. None of these definitions is right and none are wrong, they are just culturally specific. So, it is important to understand how such terms will be interpreted if we want to effectively communicate between cultural groups, or else misunderstandings may occur. In this case, there is an assumption that some, if not many, of your students will not have access to non-Western interpretations of being a Witness, so through this course teachers will engage in collaborative learning to investigate Indigenous practices of witnessing together. While it is possible that some Indigenous students may have background Knowledge in this area, it should not be assumed. However, if some of your students share their Knowledge, find ways to honour their Knowledge and include it in the course.

It is understandable that some teachers may feel apprehensive to lead students through Indigenous Knowledges, due to a fear of cultural appropriation or getting something wrong. This is a natural apprehension, but we cannot let this barrier stop us from engaging in this important work. A couple of tips that you can use to attend to your apprehension:

1. Position this as a co-learning opportunity. Share with the students that you are learning through this process, as well.
2. Highlight that this was designed by Indigenous scholars from the Dakelh communities of this region and that Knowledge Keepers from this area were consulted and collaborated with.
3. If you would like even more support, perhaps select lessons can use team teaching with either Indigenous staff in the school or district (or perhaps Dr. Louie), or working together with Knowledge keepers from the local First Nations.

These are only a couple of potential approaches that can ease apprehension on the part of educators teaching this course.

At the beginning of the year each teacher should have an extended discussion about being a Witness. Basically, all of the elements discussed in this document and that we learn through the weekly witnessing quotes. In the initial discussion it should be emphasized that we are using witnessing as our teaching and learning approach in this class because it can help us all gain a voice and perspective while creating Knowledge together.

Weekly Witnessing Guidelines

The following is a basic guideline to your weekly witnessing sessions and what each of them will consist of. Remember to build on top of what you students have learned each week about witnessing and how this process has gone for them.

1. Going over the weekly witnessing quote (expanded on in the next section) to establish the weekly approach
2. Select groups of 4-5 students that will stay together for the entire year. Try and split up groups of friends so that students have to enter less comfortable spaces of conversation
3. Students will have a 20 minute discussion as a group about (1) what they learned that week (2) how has their understanding of the topic changed (3) how their new Knowledge can impact school experiences (4) Is there anything in this week's topic that they are still struggling with? (5) or any other aspect of this week's topic.
4. ONE member of each group will play of the Witness. This will shift each week. The Witness does not speak during the discussion and only listens. The Witness should think about the directions from the weekly witnessing quote and enact those during their witnessing.
5. Once the weekly witnessing has ended, the weekly Witness will then be given the option to either create a WITNESSING ARTEFACT. These can be either short written account or create a three minute video or audio clip that summarizes what they witnessed. Remember to use the lens of the weekly witnessing quote to influence how you approach your interpretation of what has been said. You should not say specific names of your classmates, but just say generally what was happening in your group.
6. The next week a new person in your group will take on a the roll of the Witness.

Weekly Witnessing Quotes

In the course documents we have included a weekly witnessing quote that can help guide students in their approach to witnessing that week. The following five steps can be followed each week and witnessing session to ensure the students know the witnessing approach used this week, have discussed and learned the definition, can see it in action, and know how they are going to apply it in this week's witnessing session.

1. Read the quote multiple times
2. Ask the students what they think this means (take time for a rich discussion and analysis). Come to a consensus definition of what this quote means.
3. Ask the students if they agree with this value or have seen it practiced in real life.
4. Based on the definition you have established with your class, decide how you are going to apply this principle to your witnessing today. There should be intentionality and an easily accessible directive each week, based on the quotes.
5. The following class, engage in reflection for your class. "How were you able to apply last week's principle in your witnessing sessions"?

Making a Claim

At the end of the course groups will collect all of their witnessing artefacts created by each member. The group will then have a discussion about the progression they have made throughout the course, and will be aided in their memory by reading or watching the witnessing artefacts. It is important to be reflective of the progress that each group has made and each of your responsibilities as it relates to social justice and diversity. The final days of this course will focus on giving each group an opportunity to make a claim to the rest of their classmates.

Making a claim means:

1. Stating a commitment to diversity or a commitment to social justice.
2. What new responsibilities do they have to diversity or social justice?
3. How will it change their expectations of how the school community should operate?
4. What is one thing they can do as a group to support diversity in the school?
5. How will they continue to learn more about diversity and their own identities?

These claims will also be a celebration. We should honour the students for the work they have done over the term, what they have learned, and how they have come together in this course. Making a claim can be a powerful day, and the rest of the class should be reminded that they are being witnesses to the claims of their classmates, and now have a responsibility to support them in living up to and reaching their claims.