Chapter 7
Who's Represented in Canadian Teaching and Learning Centres?

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ABSTRACT

As teaching and learning centres within Canadian universities have rapidly evolved and expanded over the last few decades, various aspects of these institutes have been researched and described, such as the history of the centres, the work of staff members, and the function and offerings they provide. However, information has not been gathered with regards to the diversity of social identities of those personnel (i.e., faculty, staff, students) working within Canada's teaching and learning support centres, nor has data been collected on a large scale with regards to personnel's conceptions of diversity. This chapter explores perceptions and experiences of diversity within these centres. The findings reveal a need for more diversity awareness, leadership intervention, and critical thought surrounding the concepts and practices of diversity in Canadian teaching and learning centres.

INTRODUCTION

Within the last couple of years, U.S. college campuses have seen a surge in student activism amidst escalating tension over institutional climate. Students across the U.S. —many of them in conjunction with national initiatives such as the Black Lives Matter movement— have voiced concerns on a number of equity issues, in particular, improving the campus climate, ensuring support for people of color and enhancing student and faculty diversity in higher education. At the University of Cincinnati, students gathered for a silent protest to demand more diversity on campuses. Brown University students held a rally in response to perceived university neglect of instances of racism, sexism, and other issues. Ithaca College students engage in a walk-out over racial insensitivity on campus, and at Yale University, protest erupted after an email warning about racially insensitive Halloween costumes prompted a professor to complain about censorship. The protests have also advocated for the implementation of strategies such as teaching cultural competency, the creation of cultural centers and extensive leadership changes. As a result, *diversity* talks have come to the forefront of higher education conversations once again—well, in the U.S. at least.

In Canada, while campus protests may not be making headlines, and campus disturbances may not make the evening news to the same degree, diversity related conversations have re-emerged particularly in response to the findings from the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada: Call to Action, 2015). The report was released in late 2015 outlining the societal and educational injustices that have been inflicted upon Indigenous peoples for decades. Shortly after its release, universities and colleges across Canada began announcing and highlighting their commitment—or re-commitment—to equity, and to reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples, as well as noting the crucial role of postsecondary education in the process.

Canadian postsecondary institutions are generally viewed as tolerant, diverse and inclusive, often seen as a microcosm of larger society. Institutions often boast their commitment to building inclusive communities, promoting equity and celebrating their rich diversity. However, there is a dearth of studies at the postsecondary level that interrogates these concepts of *tolerance*, *diversity*, and *inclusion*, in a Canadian context. More specifically, few studies look at race and ethnicity in the context of teaching and learning centers[1]. Most studies on the issue of diversity in Canadian teaching and learning centers have a limited scope of diversity (e.g. diversity of disciplines; diversity as accessibility; diversity of access; etc.) (Potter & Wuetherick, 2015; Marquis, 2014). These studies look at the consequences of diversity and they often neglect the theoretical reflections or notion of the concept of diversity. Thus, as Canadian university populations continue to grow more diverse, there is a particular urgency for postsecondary institutions to understand and strive to ensure that diversity (i.e. various forms of diversity) is evident and entrenched in all areas.

Faculty developers and those working in teaching and learning centers are often charged with leading the effort to foster awareness of diversity issues in higher education. Additionally, it is argued that attention to diversity issues in teaching and learning should be a joint effort between majority and non-majority group members alike (Stanley, 2001). However, looking at anecdotal evidence in the Canadian context, a few questions arise: How many non-majority group members are present in teaching and learning centers to contribute to this "collective effort"? Consequently, another question arises: What do teaching and learning centers communicate to educational stakeholders when there is an underrepresentation of non-majority members within their organizations? Further, two other issues follow: How does the apparent homogeneity effect the *Scholarship of Teaching and Learning* (SoTL) research; and teaching and learning practices? And how can teaching and learning centers continue to have credible conversations surrounding best practices and policies for diversity and inclusiveness if there is a lack of significant representation from non-majority group members? Before any of these questions can be addressed, it is necessary to collect data with regards to conceptions of diversity and inclusion, and the range of social identities that are present within these teaching and learning centers.

A two-phase study was undertaken to begin to answer some of the aforementioned questions. The first part of the study sought to identify the range of identities that exist within Canadian teaching and learning centers. Thus, a nationwide online survey was implemented to collect demographic data and explore initial conceptions of diversity. The second part of the study examined in-depth, the experiences and perceptions of diversity and inclusion within the centers. Thus, one-on-one in-depth interviews were conducted with individuals working in teaching and learning centers across Canada.

This paper will discuss the findings from 18 in-depth interviews with individuals employed in Canadian (i.e. university) teaching and learning centers across Canada. The study sought to answer the following questions: How do personnel (i.e. faculty, staff, students) working within Canadian teaching and learning centers, define and discuss the term diversity? And to what extent are diversity initiatives employed?

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