

Atwater Reads the TRC
Community Resource
Document

by
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Outline: The goal of the project **Atwater Reads the TRC** was to help build meaningful and open relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the Montreal region in the spirit of nationwide reconciliation as recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada.

Text: *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Volume One: Summary Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future* (Lorimer Press, 2015).

1. SCHEDULE

Framework: A bi-weekly public guided reading of the TRC Report and discussion group (two-hour meetings) over five months (September 2017 – January 2018).

Opening event	Launch and NFB film screening with special guest, Abenaki filmmaker Alanis Obomsawin
Meeting #1	Introduction; Commission Activities (Pages 1–35) <i>Discover the newly acquired Indigenous Collection</i>
Meeting #2	The History (Pages 37–91)
Meeting #3	Blanket Exercise - three-hour meeting with Vicki Boldo and Laurence Lainesse
Meeting #4	The History (Pages 92–134)
Meeting #5	The Legacy (Pages 135–159)
Meeting #6	READING WEEK (Assigned additional reading and participants asked to write a reflection piece)
Meeting #7	The Legacy (Pages 160–182) The Challenge of Reconciliation (Pages 183–249)
Meeting #8	The Challenge of Reconciliation (Pages 250–317)
Meeting #9	Calls to Action (Pages 319–338)
Closing Event	Performance by Métis musician Moe Clark

2. ACTIVITY REPORT

APPROACHING THE REPORT

Over the past five months, **Atwater Reads the TRC** participants met every two weeks to read, discuss, and challenge their settler relationship to living on Indigenous territory, and learn about “Canada’s dark history,” and the legacy of residential schools. A group of twenty-five participants, which dwindled over the course of our reading series, met at the Atwater Library to listen and recognize how the history of residential schools, the 60s scoop and Canada’s Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women and Girls have not been addressed sufficiently in our education system, workplaces, and family gatherings.

In this intense look at the depth of a genocide, **Atwater Reads the TRC** forced participants to consider their own experiences as Canadians, and their positions on various issues facing Indigenous communities.

As participants learned more about our shared history, they learned the importance and difficulty of allyship, of respectful and meaningful dialogue, of ethical engagement, and of the cultivation of community and solidarity. Many recognized over the course of **Atwater Reads the TRC** how much more they had to learn.

Feedback from participants offered insight into a shift in thinking over the duration of the reading series. As one participant wrote, “It started me on the path of considering these issues. I enjoyed listening to people in the group—an intelligent and thoughtful gathering.”

The group conversation around the TRC supports the reading process, as the report is long and challenging, and the opportunity to speak about the material is radical in itself. In our society, and certainly in our institutions, it’s rare that we discuss difficult subject matter such as trauma, physical and emotional abuse and intergenerational consequences, and rare also to unpack colonial history in a gathering of strangers—who, nonetheless, became more comfortable sharing with one another over the weeks spent together.

The regular meetings helped participants create a sense of community while processing, exchanging ideas, and asking in-depth questions. It also offered opportunities for the facilitators to give the group supplementary readings and visual resources (short films, interviews, etc.) and expose participants to more Indigenous voices through literature, art, and music.

Because a fund for books was included in the budget for this project, Sarah and I had the opportunity to select an incredible array of Indigenous texts—fiction, poetry, theatre, and non-fiction, for the Atwater Library’s expanding Indigenous Collection. Many of the participants said they discovered more Indigenous voices, and this was essential to the experience of **Atwater Reads the TRC**. One participant added, “It made me want to continue reading/listening/looking to the sources of Indigenous experience, literature, biography, interviews, conferences, concerts, documentary, radio, film and exhibitions as a way of understanding.”

In this community-based learning context, participants were exposed to information and attitudes different from their own. **Atwater Reads the TRC** offered touchstones and opportunities to learn more, and in turn became more sympathetic and aware of Indigenous issues. Several participants brought forward newspaper articles, online links, and community events highlighting Indigenous art and culture within and beyond Montreal.

CHALLENGES

Some of the challenges of leading a public reading group of the TRC is the emotional labour involved. Not only is the *Final Report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Volume One: Summary Honouring the Truth, Reconciling for the Future* a powerful and dense text, but it requires readers to bear witness to survivors' testimonies, collective trauma, pain, and religious institutional abuse. It's difficult and challenging work for the facilitators, as well as the participants. Many individuals wept publicly, and spoke to the impact of reading this text as a group as a public means of wading through grief. We don't have many gatherings to do this type of work collectively, and it seems essential towards the path of reconciliation. A suggestion is to have additional support for people who might need it, which extends beyond what the facilitators, depending on their training, may be able to offer.

Most of the participants were settlers. Only two Indigenous participants started with the group, but they eventually no longer attended. All too often, Indigenous people are tasked with educating settlers about the generational impacts of residential schools, a task many might not be prepared for, especially if they didn't expect it when they signed up to participate in an activity like **Atwater Reads the TRC**. However, it is conceivable that reading the report itself stands in for many Indigenous voices (given the large amount of personal testimony by survivors), and the additional excerpts of Indigenous Literatures added even more such voices.

One participant noted, "I would recommend introducing more contact with people in surrounding Indigenous communities. It is one thing to read and discuss, but many of the participants may not have had an opportunity to interact with our neighbours, and actually hear [Indigenous] spoken languages, ways of thinking, and expressions of culture and truth."

Additional material is essential to bring more Indigenous voices into the conversation. Radical Indigenous writers like Eve Tuck, Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, John Burrows, Lee Maracle, and Taiaiake Alfred pushed the conversation further, while providing useful conceptual frameworks.

Some participants, however, felt external texts veered too far from the focus of reading the actual report. One participant stated, "Focus more on the development of a curriculum—not set in stone, but more tied to the text with other materials. I wished we had discussed the report more. Also, better communication between the group and the leaders. Cultivate more active participation."

As **Atwater Reads the TRC** isn't a university-style course, or even a book club, the challenges of leading a group through a talking circle-style conversation can be complex. It's easy for the group to veer far from the text. A way to navigate this might be by restructuring the format of the gathering (i.e. devoting half of the evening to the chapters, and the rest to supporting media, documents and events). Also, two hours is both long and limiting.

Another participant remarked, “Leaders should also be far more responsive to suggestions from the group about how to structure sessions—I found the articles we were given weren’t appropriate for this group, maybe more for a sociology class. The films were great.”

Given the nature of leading a project like this, perhaps the possibility an open forum for participants to share resources and cultural events would be wise. Email isn’t ideal. Perhaps a Facebook group, though not all participants are on that platform. **Atwater Reads the TRC** is a massive undertaking to navigate, as the report is a large text to read and maneuver through. But it’s the group dynamics that can be the most challenging, and can quickly snowball into endless email correspondences, and thus adds to the emotional labour of the facilitators.

EMOTIONAL AND CULTURAL SUPPORT

For facilitators, it’s imperative to have emotional and cultural support. Perhaps partnering with the local Indigenous community institutions to add a more Indigenous perspective and the opportunity to have some traditional teachings. The emotional undertaking is a lot to carry as a facilitator, and there should be resources available to help aid this process.

In the group, it is essential to remind people to treat each other with basic respect, as participants tend to react emotionally, sometimes interrupting one another. It’s imperative to build a safe space for all.

A listening circle-style conversation is most effective. A talking stick would be helpful, and most certainly highlight Indigenous voices. As a participant noted, “The only other Indigenous participant in our group was cut off every time she spoke, and wasn’t listened to. It is inherent to leading a group like this to listen to Indigenous people, and centre them in the conversation.”

In terms of the format of the reading series, once every two weeks is too demanding. A monthly meeting is ideal. Another participant suggested, “It was probably too short or too long. Maybe this should be a week-long retreat, or six months of discussion—it feels at once not concentrated enough and rushed.”

Many participants found the Blanket Exercise essential to understanding European–Indigenous relations, and an effective means of learning about colonization. It’s an emotional and influential experience, which created the arc for the reading series. Most participants required time to reflect and process the emotional undertaking of being part of the Blanket Exercise. One participant said, “It challenged and changed the way I think. I’d like to hear more on how European and Indigenous communities should share responsibility on how to go forward. Who does what?”

As much of the material is heavy, and triggering, ending on the Calls to Action is a way of reaching out, and moving forward, collectively and individually. As a participant concluded, “Reading the TRC recommendations provide a great deal more depth of my understanding of the situation, problems, and colonial attitudes.”

Childcare, snacks, and coffee were available to make the series more welcoming and accessible.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What does reconciliation mean to you?
2. Have you encountered stories about residential schools before, and if so, where?
3. How does reading the *TRC Final Report* challenge or contradict your initial understanding of the impact of residential schools?
4. What is the Indian Act? What are some of its implications?
5. What does decolonization mean to you?
6. How is reading the *TRC Final Report* changing your thinking?
7. What does reconciliation look like for you individually, and for us collectively?
8. What are some of the challenges of reconciliation?
9. How do you see yourself in relationship to reconciliation?
10. After reading the TRC report, how do you want to move forward?
11. How has reading the TRC report together as a group affected you, your lives, and your relationship to living on Indigenous land?
12. How do you see bringing one of the ninety-four Calls to Action into your job, life, family and community?

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

POETRY

- Deerchild, Rosanna, "Mama's Testament: Truth and Reconciliation," (Bookland Press, 2015)
Half, Louise Bernice, "Owners of Themselves," *Burning in This Midnight Dream* (Coteau Books, 2016)
Joe, Rita, "I Lost My Talk," *Native Poetry in Canada* (Broadview Press, 2001)
Rogers, Janet, "Final Report," *Totem Poles & Railroads* (Arp Books, 2016)
Webb-Campbell, "Unsilencing the Mouth," *Who Took My Sister?* (Book Thug, 2018)
Webb-Campbell, "Litany for Mercy," *Who Took My Sister?* (Book Thug, 2018)

FILMS

- Jackson, Lisa, "Savage," Documentary (06:02, 2009)
LeBlanc, Junoir Real, "Uprooted Generation," Documentary (07:16, 2013)
Obomsawin, Alanis, "My Name Is Kahentiiosta," (29:00, 1995)
Obomsawin, Alanis, "Richard Cardinal: Cry from a Diary of a Metis Child," (29:00, 1986)
Papatie, Kevin, "The Amendment" (5:00, 2007)
Wolochatiuk, Tim, "We Were Children," (1:28, 2012)
"Keep Calm and Decolonize," CBC Arts Five of Canada's most distinguished filmmakers respond to Buffy Sainte-Marie's call to "Keep Calm and Decolonize."

MUSIC & VIDEOS

- Tanya Tagaq & Buffy Sainte-Marie "You Got To Run (Spirit of the Wind)"
Rebecca Thomas TEDTalk "Etuptmunk – Two-Eyed Seeing"
Savvy Simon "Makes learning Mi'kmaq look easy" The Coast
Leanne Betasamosake Simpson "How to Steal a Canoe"
A Tribe Called Red "Performance for Missing and Murdered Indigenous Women"
Eastern Owl "Baby"

ESSAYS

- Yang, Wayne K and Tuck, Eve, "Decolonization Is Not A Metaphor," 2012
Motherhood, Indigenous "This Reconciliation is for the Colonizer," 2017