

De-colonizing Canadian Post-Secondary Education

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Abstract

In Canada, the recent Truth and Reconciliation Committee of Canada Report (2015) revealed the devastating impact of over a century of forced assimilation on Indigenous peoples. In the educational context, assimilation manifested itself in the residential school system, a system which existed from the late 19th century until 1996 and whose mandate was to “Kill the Indian in the child” (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada [TRCC], n.d.). Though the closure of the last residential school marks a significant shift in Indigenous educational policy, many scholars argue that the Canadian post-secondary education system continues the process of colonization by excluding culturally relevant content and maintaining Eurocentric teaching approaches. In this paper we will examine the ongoing process of Truth and Reconciliation in Canada by first outlining the impact of colonial practices on the current participation of Indigenous students in post-secondary education as measured by enrollment and completion rates. In the second half of the paper, we will use a case-based approach to illustrate more inclusive post-secondary educational practices that can benefit both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students. More specifically, we demonstrate decolonization efforts in two course initiatives in history and education. We aim to illustrate how the inclusion of Indigenous pedagogy facilitates cross-cultural understandings when the four Rs (respect, relevance, reciprocity and responsibility) of Kirkness and Barnhard (2001) are applied as a framework to course design.

Keywords: Indigenous Education, Qualitative Research, Case Study, Instructional Design

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Introduction

Released in June 2015 following an exhaustive seven year study, *The Truth and reconciliation commission of Canada report* revealed the destructive impact of centuries of assimilationist governmental policies on the Indigenous communities of Canada. These policies are most dramatically embodied in the residential schools system, which has left a legacy of physical and mental abuse impacting not only individuals but the social fabric of communities for generations. Moving forward, the report called for a “process of truth and healing” in order to encourage reconciliation between both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities (TRCC, 2015, p. 23). The report called on Canadians “to *practise* reconciliation in our everyday lives” and encouraged reconciliation in all Canadian institutions, including the education system, based on the fundamental premise that healing can only occur when colonizer and colonized share a mutual understanding of past wrongs and a sense of mutual respect (TRCC, 2015, p. 21).

In our paper we begin with a brief overview of the *Truth and reconciliation commission of Canada report* (2015) and then examine the reasons suggested by current literature for the gap between Indigenous and non- Indigenous completion rates within Canadian educational institutions. In the second half of the paper, we propose some suggestions for moving forward at the post-secondary level through two cases studies, which illustrate practical applications of the report recommendations in teaching in the humanities and education. Our analysis will show how with some modification to pedagogy and content it is possible to create a more inclusive educational environment that meets the needs of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous learners.

The authors

Before we continue with our analysis, we feel it is important to stop at this juncture and, in the tradition of Indigenous teaching, outline the position of the authors, both of whom stand in a precarious position as privileged others, or members of the colonizing class. By presenting the bias we bring to the analysis it prepares you, the reader, to better interpret the lens we have applied in our discussions (Wilson, 2008).

Robert Lawson is a fourth generation Canadian of European descent who works as an instructional designer at the University of Manitoba. Given his background, he has mixed feelings about researching and writing about Indigenous pedagogy. As a non-Indigenous person, one can feel as though one is trespassing into an area they have no right to speak about, particularly given Canada’s legacy of colonization. On the other hand, an instructional designer has an obligation to create courses that are universally accessible to every student regardless of ethnicity or physical limitation.

Kathy identifies herself as a third culture child, having been raised in Inuit communities as a non-Inuit, she neither feels fully at home in the “south” nor the “north” of Canada. Positioned in this liminal space, much of her research and teaching is guided by critical pedagogy as she seeks to explore the inherent biases dominant culture brings to learning spaces.

The Legacy of Colonialism and Indigenous Approaches to Education

The truth and reconciliation commission of Canada report presents a depressing portrait of the legacy of Canadian residential schools, which were part of broader government efforts since the 19th century to assimilate Indigenous peoples into Canadian society by extinguishing their culture. Indigenous children were forcibly taken from their homes and sent to boarding schools in order to destroy cultural links with their families and their communities. Upon arrival at a school, they were forbidden from speaking their native language and in many cases deliberately separated from siblings or other relatives. As the report attests, conditions in the schools could be horrific:

Schools were for the most part badly constructed, poorly maintained, overcrowded, unsanitary fire traps. Many children were fed a substandard diet and given a substandard education, and worked too hard in manual labour tasks. For far too long, they died in tragically high numbers [that went unacknowledged by the larger populace of Canada]. Discipline was harsh and unregulated; abuse was rife and unreported. It was, at best, institutionalized child neglect. (TRCC, 2015, p. 43).

In sum, over 150,000 Indigenous and Métis children were sent to residential schools, 6,000 of whom perished from malnutrition, disease and other causes (TRCC, 2015).

Given the horrific legacy of residential schools, it doesn't surprise that a large portion of the Indigenous population feels both angry and powerless towards both the government and educational institutions. Not only are those who experienced the residential schools impacted, but also their children and their childrens' children. This is exemplified in statements made by Wab Kinew, the son of a residential school survivor and public speaker in Canada:

I went out into the world as an angry young man in my high school and early university years. I ended up getting into a lot of trouble. Not just mom-and-dad-trouble, like real, legit, getting arrested trouble, for drinking and driving or getting into fights.... My father was put into a situation where he was powerless. It unleashed anger and rage inside of him, and that unleashed something in him that overtook a big chunk of his life. My experience growing up wasn't as severe as his was by any means, but it was similar in that I was made to feel powerless. Instead of a priest and a nun, it was my father. (Kinew, 2015)

Wab's story begins to explain the discrepancy between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student completion rates in higher education, which is statistically significant. According to Parkin (2015), 29% of Indigenous Canadians have no high school leaving certificate vs. 12% for non-Indigenous; further, 48% of Indigenous vs. 65% of non-Indigenous Canadians have completed some form of post-secondary credential (2015, p.18). Parkin goes on to note that the gap between Indigenous and non-Indigenous student university completion has widened by about 5% since 1996 (p. 19). He attributes these lower graduation rates to the legacy of colonialism (as cited in Sachgau, 2015): "You've got generations of grandparents and parents who were scarred by their experience in education," he said, referring to Canada's

residential schools. “They’re hardly going to trust that system when it comes to educating their children.” (n.p.).

Beyond the legacy of colonialism, there are other proposed reasons for lower Indigenous completion rates at Canadian universities and colleges. The Indigenous population of Canada is made up of many diverse cultures, from the Inuit of the north to the Haida of the west and the Mi’kmaq of the east; there are more than fifty language groupings found among the Indigenous People of Canada and greater still are the number of cultural groupings. Yet educational initiatives have often erroneously been reduced to a one size fits all approach to “Indigenous education.” At the risk of sounding reductionist, which is the very issue at the heart of the critiques of Indigenous education, there have been some common pedagogical characteristics identified among the varied nations, as there are also some commonalities for teaching and learning found across the varied western/European cultures. Many of these accepted common characteristics contrast sharply with traditional university teaching methods, particularly with respect to relationships. In traditional European classrooms, a “pyramid” symbolizes the relationship between students and teacher; the professor is an expert who transmits information to learners and has “power over” their class (Alberta Education, 2005, p.18). In Indigenous approaches, there is a reciprocal relationship between the teacher and the learner.

The circle, a prominent symbol for many Indigenous communities, is emblematic of this reciprocity or “power with” (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 18) because the circle symbolizes equality. In line with this model, Indigenous educators strongly encourage group work: “Cooperative learning, where students work in small groups to complete tasks or projects, is an effective strategy to use with Indigenous students because it reflects the sense of cooperation and community that is a vital aspect of Aboriginal cultures” (Alberta Education, 2005, p. 91). However this must be approached with a word of caution, as teamwork in European cultures is again approached in a very different way than in Indigenous cultures and so simply adding collaborative opportunities does not constitute Indigenous pedagogical approaches because of the different understandings around relationships (Battiste, 2002). A second application of Indigenous teaching methods is the development of experiential and authentic learning tasks and assessments (Battiste, 2002; Alberta Education, 2005). Reflection and metacognition, the practice of monitoring one’s learning, are also extremely important (Alberta Education, 2005). Indigenous educators often emphasize storytelling and a holistic worldview that adds context to the purpose and place of learning. More pragmatically, guidelines for Indigenous education advocate for clearly delineated instructions on assignments and activities, including the use of rubrics, which is good teaching practice generally, but critically important when working with Indigenous students who may have past negative experiences associated with formal learning (Battiste, 2002; Alberta Education, 2005).

One proposed solution to the achievement gap which aims at directly responding to the legacy of colonialism and cultural differences in approaches to learning is the establishment of Indigenous run and controlled post-secondary institutions often referred to as tribal colleges/universities. Tribal colleges may be associated with larger post-secondary institutions in Canada or may be independent; however, their success has also been heavily critiqued when measured by cost/student and graduation rates (Maltest & Associates, 2002). Action item 62 from the *Truth and reconciliation*

call to action report asks not only for funding and specialized programs for Indigenous students but for the adoption of Indigenous pedagogies into mainstream educational offerings (TRCC, 2015b). Part of the path to reconciliation, they suggest, is that Canadian post-secondary institutions need to move away from a strictly western-centric approach to education and promote respect for Indigenous culture and knowledge systems by adopting less colonial approaches to education. Across Canada there is a call from Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars for “Indigenizing the curriculum” at all levels of education; however, the means to do this are still under debate both in terms of best practices and administrative constraints. This call is not new, nor is the research, but it is gaining traction in mainstream educational provisions. As early as 1991, educational researchers Kirkness and Barnhart described how universities could cultivate respect for Indigenous culture by incorporating Indigenous knowledge into the curriculum through a framework they defined as the four Rs, which includes the concepts of Respect, Relevance, Reciprocity and Responsibility. Further, they have evaluated how the relationship between Indigenous students and their institutions must evolve to the point where education is reciprocal and not simply based on the one-sided transmission of information and cultural expectations to the learner. Instead, there should be a genuine exchange of ideas and culture between instructors and students. It is this second aspect we have attempted to explore through the cases presented. How can we flip the power pyramid as it were, and develop educational experiences that foster collaboration and build relationships in a way that is respectful, reciprocal, relevant and responsible?

More Inclusive Content: Case study 1

The first case study presents an analysis of the introductory distance education Canadian history course at the University of Manitoba: History 1440 -- History of Canada. History 1440 is a two semester course, which examines Canadian history from the end of the Ice Age and the arrival of the first Indigenous peoples in North America to the 21st century. For many years, introductory history courses, the ones that hopefully engage students enough to study the subject further, have either ignored or diminished Indigenous contributions to Canadian history. As Paul Chartrand writes:

The Canadian story about 1885 is the symbolic ‘driving of the last spike’ or the completion of the trans-Canadian railway. Our stories are different and sinister. If we are to develop better relations between Aboriginal peoples and other Canadians, it might be a good idea to start by talking about our stories and see if we can create better stories for a common future: a common story of Canada. (2007, p. 18)

There needs to be a complete story; for example, how did the Métis and Indigenous peoples view treaty making, how did they see Confederation. A more complete story will benefit all Canadians, not just Indigenous peoples.

Seeing their stories and culture reflected in educational materials is extremely important to Indigenous learners: “To Aboriginal students especially, Aboriginal content—whether in a story, a math example or a problem-solving technique—can have a profound impact on how they see themselves. It can also affect their understanding of how others see them and their cultures” (Alberta Education, 2005, p.

50). Given the past colonization of First Nations people and consequently their stories, content must not only include Indigenous topics but also Indigenous voices.

At first glance, History 1440 appears rich in Indigenous content. Upon accessing the course's HTML web pages, students will immediately notice a banner depicting a train, the 19th century symbol of national progress, and a series of teepees:



One could interpret these images as symbolic of the subject matter expert's attempt to balance non-Indigenous and Indigenous historical content.

Of History 1440's eight units, only Unit 2, entitled "Aboriginal –European contact," focuses entirely on Indigenous peoples, introducing students to "Aboriginal migration to Canada and later Aboriginal contact and interrelationships with the Europeans" (Young, 2011, "Unit 2: Introduction"). Tracing Aboriginal history back 10,000 years, the subject matter expert details the rich cultural diversity of Indigenous peoples, the importance of oral stories in reconstructing First Nations history and makes it clear that cultural contact with Europeans was reciprocal: "Aboriginal-European contact was a two-way process" (Young, 2011, "Unit 2: Synopsis"). Later, she singles out Aboriginal women for their strong contributions to the fur trade: (Young, 2011, "Unit 4: Synopsis") and addresses other events in Indigenous history, such as the Métis uprising, the residential schools and modern First Nations movements towards self-government.

Despite the inclusion of many First Nations topics, the course needs more material and references that directly reflect Indigenous voices. The inclusion of stories depicting Indigenous spirituality, culture and history using a range of media would give students a more holistic portrait of the First Nations and appeal to learners who require a diversity of teaching approaches beyond simple reading and writing activities.

Textbooks

The Indigenous content in the principle course text, J.M. Bumsted's *A history of the Canadian peoples* (2011), is impressive in scope. There are a total of 21 text boxes, which are often used to profile prominent Aboriginals in Canadian history, such as the Miq'maq leader Henri Membertou or Tecumseh, and 17 illustrations, and 4 maps or graphs with Indigenous themes. Similar to the course units, the author begins by tracing the origins of Indigenous peoples in Canada and acknowledges that "Thousands of years of human development preceded the appearance of Europeans" (2011, p. 4). Later, he describes the importance of oral traditions and includes a Cree origin story from Western James Bay. When detailing Cabot and Cartier's early exploration of Canada, Bumsted demonstrates his even-handed approach to Indigenous issues: "While most Canadians could, if pressed, name one or two of these explorers, it is very doubtful whether they could offer the name of a single comparable First Nations explorer" (2011, p. 33). In later chapters, Bumsted details

the “good deal of racism and prejudice” that guided the opening of the West (2011, p. 241) and the “abuse and intimidation” of the residential schools (2011, p. 525).

Strangely, Bumsted’s choice of illustrations do not reflect the relatively unbiased approach of his text. The images in the first part of the book reinforce the stereotype of the “aggressive, primitive Indian,” likely because of an over-reliance on non-Indigenous sources. On page 20 we see the Inuit attacking English explorers and on page 44 a group of First Nations torturing and executing French missionaries.



Bumsted, J.M. (2011). *A history of the Canadian Peoples*. 4th ed. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.



Bumsted, J.M. (2011). *A history of the Canadian Peoples*. 4th ed. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.

One wonders why the author would not balance these illustrations by depicting the impact of disease on Indigenous-Canadians; surely, more Aboriginals died from European diseases than Europeans at the hands of Aboriginals. Alternatively, the author could have chosen images of cooperation; had it not been for the First Nations, many Europeans would have had great difficulty surviving in Canada’s harsh climate.

Other images reinforce the positive aspects of Canadian paternalism, including the following photograph on page 378:



Bumsted, J.M. (2011). *A history of the Canadian Peoples*. 4th ed. Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press.

Here we see Indigenous peoples from a village on Hudson's Bay receiving medical treatment. However, we do not see any photographs of residential schools nor the squalid conditions found on some reservations. These omissions are startling.

There are four other required books, three of which deal partly or wholly with Indigenous themes. W. Stewart's (2007) *The Ermatingers* details the experiences of an Ojibwa-Canadian family in 19th century Quebec and Afua Cooper's (2006) *The Hanging of Angelique* sheds light on the colonial slavery of African Canadians and Aboriginals. Wayne Warry's (2008) *Ending denial: understanding Aboriginal issues* provides insight into the issues impacting contemporary First Nations in Canada. Notably, none of these authors are Indigenous. In his introduction, Wayne Warry, an anthropologist who has worked closely with Aboriginal communities, acknowledges this fact but believes that the "challenges" facing First Nations "cannot, and will not, be met by Aboriginal peoples alone" (2008, p. 19). Among other things, Warry's work is invaluable for describing the failure of assimilationist policies in Canada, for critiquing contemporary neo-conservative arguments in favour of further assimilation and for demonstrating media bias with respect to First Nations issues. Some of his facts are shocking, including his reference to the "forced sterilization of Indian and Inuit women" in the 1970s (2008, p. 58).

Assessments

Though History 1440's assignments are strong in Indigenous content, there is room for a more authentic assessment approach. There are a total of four essays, each worth 15%, four discussion forums worth a total of 10%, and a final exam worth 30%. Many of the discussion and essay questions require the application of higher orders skills, such as reflection, analysis and synthesis, appropriate for a first year class. However, Discussion Forum 2 is the only assignment that asks students to work directly with primary documents. Here, students must critically assess original French images and text, if they can read the language, from New France: "Identify at least five aspects of life in New France in this period that are evident in the images" (Young, 2011, "Discussion assignment"). As a preface to this forum, the course should give students more opportunity to practice more authentic history by analyzing primary documents. The essays are largely book reports that focus on the four required texts that supplement the course and the textbook. The first essay is on Afua Cooper's *The Hanging of Angelique* (2006) and the second focuses on the *Ermatingers* (2007). In preparing the latter essay, students are asked to focus on Ojibwa culture

and their contributions to the fur trade. The third essay looks at Winnipeg 1912 (2005), a book that presents a snapshot of early twentieth century Winnipeg, and the final essay relates to Wayne Warry's *Ending denial: Understanding Aboriginal issues*. The following is an example of an essay question from this last assignment:

“Canadians need to demand more of our media, educate ourselves, and seek out information that is based on solid research and first-hand understandings of Aboriginal communities. But we must also think creatively and, as Aboriginal people would suggest, with our hearts as well as our minds” (*Denial*, p. 186).” Do you agree/disagree with Warry? Use Warry's arguments to develop your answer. (Young, 2011, “Essay 4”).

More First-hand accounts in History 1440 will help produce the “first hand understandings” to which Warry is referring. Two final adjustments I would make to History 1440 would be the addition of stronger grading rubrics. As it stands, students are given grading criteria and excellent essay writing tips but not full scale rubrics with detailed specifications for each grade.

More Inclusive Approach: Case Study 2

One of the growing concerns in education is the continued alienation of Indigenous students in the public school system. Students report a sense of disconnect from school based on both social factors, such as racism and socio-economic status, but also in the way in which learning is approached. Recognizing this problem, particularly with regard to science education, Elders Albert and Murdena Marshall of Unamaki (Cape Breton) Canada proposed the concept of Etuaptmumk (two-eyed seeing). Two eyed seeing, as described by Bartlett, Marshall, Marshall (2007), refers to learning to see from one eye with the strengths of Indigenous ways of knowing and from the other eye with the strengths of western knowledges and ways of knowing and using both eyes together for the benefit of all (p.4).

In this case, the application of two eyed seeing to the design of a blended teacher education science methodology course will be discussed. This case is unique in that the class consisted of two separate cohorts who did not physically meet each other because face to face sessions were held at different locations, depending on cohort membership (in community or on campus). As such, the only time students were all together was during the online portion of the course, which consisted of both synchronous and asynchronous events. This design was contingent on the course's primary student demographic -- 60% of the students self-identified as Indigenous -- leading discussions from an Indigenous perspective that could not authentically be shared by the non-Indigenous instructor. Therefore, the main consideration of the design was to create a safe space for the discussion of student perspectives, which were variously informed by the teaching of science education from both Indigenous and non-Indigenous sources. This approach was facilitated by “low risk” tasks that provided scaffolding to allow for deeper discussions in “higher risk” tasks, as well as by the design of holistic and experiential activities. The function of each of these within the course design will be discussed in turn.

Low risk activities were defined as activities where participation was optional, was not for assessment and took the form of face to face classroom discussions, asynchronous sharing within discussion forums and participation in live virtual meetings. Though the expectation of participation in activities without assessment as a reward might seem problematic, regular participation in education courses is expected as part of the development of the professional persona of a teacher. From week one to week thirteen the asynchronous low risk participation activities were designed to facilitate community building within the online space and were also designed to encourage cross-cohort communication and two-eyed seeing. For example, the first online task asked students to draw and share a picture of a scientist. Using images to explore bias in science rather than text was both less intimidating for students new to the online forum, but also engaging as students were able to laugh about drawing skills and began to critique and question perspectives in a lighthearted manner. Students then moved to evaluating literature and, finally, to discussing educational choices made by members of the group in the high risk tasks.

The synchronous online meetings, hosted on Blackboard Collaborate, comprised the second low risk activity set. Students were told these were optional sessions in the form of tutorials where issues around assignments or general questions could be posed. These were very well attended and offered the two cohorts another opportunity to mix and develop understanding of one another around the shared objective of doing well in the assignments. The meetings were recorded and shared back into the LMS for students unable to attend the live session.

Finally, the face to face sessions incorporated at least one activity during each meeting where students could discuss issues and learning from the asynchronous events. These were designed to allow students from the respective cohorts to share concerns that were relevant to their cohort and that may have been too distressing to share in the larger class. They were also designed to allow space for debriefing the experience of the mixed class.

High risk tasks were defined as the culminating assessment tasks for the course. Typically in science methodology courses this assessment involves the design and presentation of a sample lesson. Given the blended nature of the course, students were asked to complete this assignment by presenting the lesson and recording it on video. I did not anticipate the full extent of the value of this task. Students recorded not only demonstrations from typical classrooms but also outdoor experiences and field trips to local museums. The lessons, however, not only highlighted different approaches to teaching but different living conditions as many students filmed lessons in their own homes, which allowed students to learn about each other and their home lives. Students were asked to upload videos into our shared online space and review and evaluate the videos for their own learning in an “interactive notebook,” which is a form of journaling that incorporated structured observations and reflection. Without explicit instruction this became an interesting study in contrasts as on campus students presented lessons in the traditional “learn the parts, then the whole” approach to science education while Indigenous students presented the reverse. In other words, each student presented from the eye of his or her own dominant culture. Students were encouraged to discuss pedagogical choices made by the creators of the videos in the larger discussion forum; however, this assignment was designed to allow for the interrogation of two-eyed seeing on a personal level through the journaling activity.

Leading up to the activity described above, a second high risk activity asked students to identify and research an issue in science that was of particular importance to them individually and share this in the format of a research presentation poster. The student teachers were then asked to discuss the poster and their learning around the issue in a five minute video and share this in the course LMS. Student teachers were then asked to review the videos of others and again the activity was debriefed in the discussion forum.

At the end of the course, the culminating assessment task asked students to integrate all of their learning from the semester by developing an interdisciplinary unit of work that addressed aspects of four of the courses students were taking concurrently. This was a group task, which was presented face-to-face in individual cohorts at the end of term. To celebrate their accomplishments, this session was collapsed into a one day event and lunch was provided to the students.

Conclusion and Discussion

In an examination of Kirkness's and Barnhardt's (1991) Four Rs framework as applied to these two cases we see acknowledgement of cultural respect. In case one this is done through presenting balanced content that more accurately reflects history from multiple perspectives while in case two we see respect applied through the positioning of the students as leaders in the course, which facilitates the acknowledgement and encouragement of cultural perspectives on an equal footing. For many years in Canada, history courses have presented an unbalanced account of the history of our country, which has been a major factor in preventing reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Canadians.

Relevance is attempted through the design of assessments that reflect future work practices in the respective disciplines represented by the cases, but also with regard to developing students' self-identity and ability to see self within the institutions as a whole. A more inclusive curriculum and a more truthful national story will benefit all learners.

Reciprocity was particularly represented in case two with the application of a two-eyed seeing course design. This approach encouraged the empowerment of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous students with respect to their own perspectives and those of their fellow students. Using their other eye they could develop a binocular vision that allowed them to appreciate Indigenous and non-Indigenous approaches. This approach would be difficult to implement in many classrooms because students require a high degree of self-efficacy. Students are expected to function as "experts" both in terms of lesson design and cultural competence from the position of their respective cultures and be willing to bring this forward as the subject of course discussions. This approach also requires the careful scaffolding of relationship building tasks.

Finally, engagement in the concept of shared responsibility both on the side of the course design and the student was facilitated in case one by teaching the students to evaluate the source of their history, the images used and the biases they present through course design that encourages dialogue around the objects of our history. This design gives students an opportunity to begin the process of deconstructing the traditional power structures at play in university settings. While in case two the students themselves were celebrated and affirmed through the culture of the course. Through shared participation, students were given the opportunity to shape the direction of their learning.

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