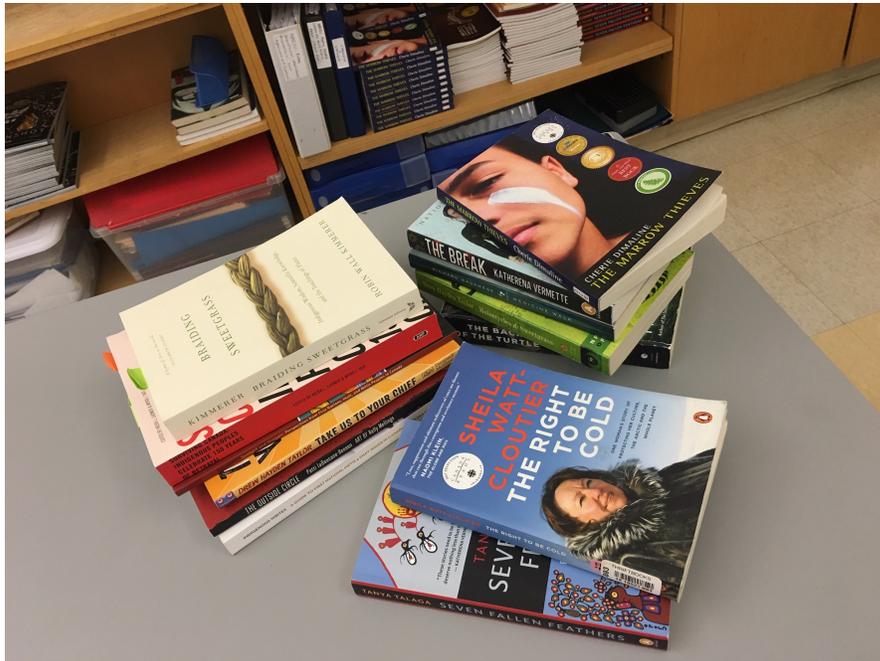


## Ottawa high school students will now take an Indigenous literature course.

### But how are non-Indigenous educators expected to teach it?

By Menaka Raman-Wilms



Ottawa’s new compulsory grade 11 course replaces traditionally taught texts with books by Indigenous authors. Photo credit: Menaka Raman-Wilms

Kelsey Brown had already accepted her new teaching position when she learned the full extent of the job.

“It was terrifying,” she says, reflecting back on it. “I don’t know if in my career I’ve ever been more nervous about teaching something.”

Brown already had six years of experience, and was moving to a new school at the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board. Among the more familiar English and social studies courses she was slated to teach, there was one called contemporary Indigenous voices. She’d accepted the position without knowing what it was.

“The panic set in,” Brown explains. That was when she learned it was an Indigenous literature course being piloted for the board. It was replacing the previous grade 11 English course. And Brown was expected to teach it.

“I felt a lot of responsibility, and a lot of weight on me to teach this course with respect,” she says. “I had very little knowledge, whether it be about culture, whether it be about history.”

The Ottawa-Carleton District School Board is one of a handful of boards in southern Ontario that is making Indigenous literature a compulsory high school course. It is designed to expose students to different experiences and ways of thinking, and help them view issues from an Indigenous perspective. However, the course presents a challenge to educators, who must teach literature and discuss cultural issues that are often unfamiliar to them.

Many teachers, like Brown, are non-Indigenous and don’t know where to start.

### **Fears and Hesitations**

The contemporary Indigenous voices course that Brown teaches is unofficially known as Indigenous literature. In February, the Ottawa-Carleton District School Board announced the course would replace the current grade 11 English credit.

It’s one of a handful of boards in Ontario that are making this change: York Region, Upper Canada and Hastings and Prince Edward are also doing so. While many boards have offered it as an optional course for a few years, making it compulsory will ensure every high school student reads book by Indigenous authors.

The implementation will take time, though.

Last year, the OCDSB ran a single pilot course, taught by Brown. This year it expanded to nine schools, and thirteen have already signed on for next year; that's just over half of the board's 25 secondary schools.

"Everybody is really concerned about doing it the right way," says Kim Bruton, a literacy coach at the board who helps train educators to teach the course. In her workshops, she says teachers have discussions about how to approach difficult subjects, as well as getting over their fears and hesitations about teaching Indigenous works.

Brown describes her initial reaction to the course as one of uncertainty. "The fact that I was, if you will, a middle class white woman teaching my students about Indigenous literature," she explains, "I felt I did not know enough. And I was just very nervous."

Last year, Brown had very little support.

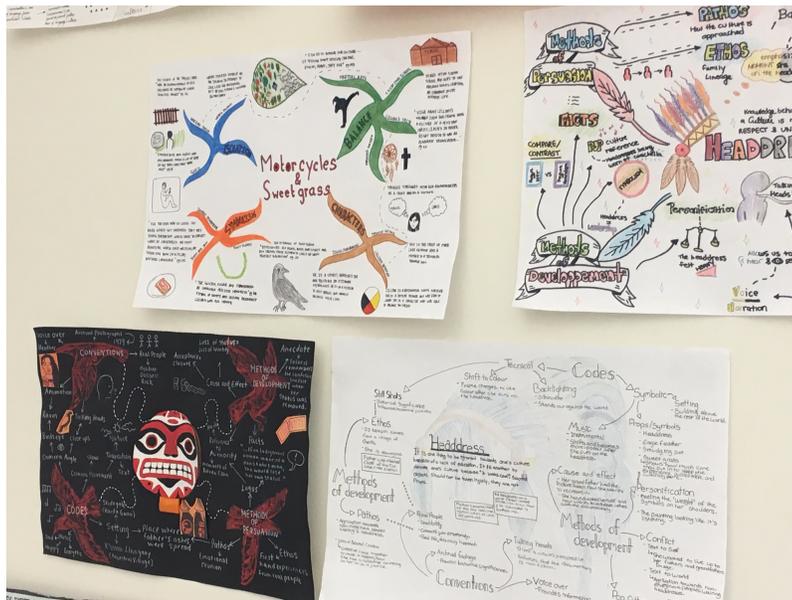
"I don't know if everyone that was involved in the decision of piloting the program fully understood how much it would be to take on," she says. Her department head had experience teaching the elective version of the course, so she got advice from her. But Brown still had to do additional work to make sure she was prepared to lead her students through the material. "I did a lot of self-educating," she adds.

Now that they're a second year into the course, Brown notes there are more resources and options for teachers. She's helped lead professional development workshops herself, and sees that her feedback and experience is being implemented into how teachers are taught to approach subject matter.

Educators who are running the course this year were given access to professional development programs, such as Bruton’s workshops. The OCDSB has an Indigenous education department that works with the teachers: educators are given professional development training, access to coaches, online forums and support, as well as suggested community partners whom they can consult.

Jane Alexander, who is the principal of high school curriculum at the OCDSB, says the board does not want to rush the implementation. The plan is to gradually introduce it to more and more schools each year to ensure educators have the proper support and resources. She acknowledges that teachers, many of whom are non-Indigenous, need to be ready to teach the material.

“The most important facet of this work,” says Alexander, “is that the teachers feel prepared. Until there are teachers in the school who are feeling confident, it would not be time to move forward.”



Student assignments line the walls of Kelsey Brown’s classroom. Photo Credit: Menaka Raman-Wilms.

## **Making Indigenous Stories Visible**

The decision to make the Indigenous literature course compulsory is a response to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's calls to action. Recommendations 62 and 63 ask that Canadian education include Indigenous issues and perspectives, with the goal of helping students develop intercultural understanding and empathy.

By introducing all high school students to stories with Indigenous characters and points of view, the hope is that the next generation of Canadians will be exposed to new ways of thinking about broader social issues.

**“When I was in high school, I didn’t even know there were Indigenous authors. I didn’t see any experiences like my own in books, so you feel sort of invalidated.”**

- **Waubgeshig Rice, author**

Waubgeshig Rice, an author originally from Wasauksing First Nation in Ontario, says the implementation of this course will help address gaps in the education system.

“It’s important to make up for what’s been lost,” he says. “There are generations of Canadians who didn’t get the full picture of what this country really is because of what the education system failed to do.”

Rice’s novel, *Legacy*, is one of several texts that educators can choose to teach, and his latest book, *Moon of the Crusted Snow*, is being considered for next year.

Though he says it’s important to help kids from other cultures better understand Indigenous perspectives, Rice also emphasizes how reading this literature is particularly

important for Indigenous kids. “When I was in high school, I didn’t even know there were Indigenous authors,” he says. “I didn’t see any experiences like my own in books, so you feel sort of invalidated. You don’t feel like your stories or your culture are viable.”

There are over 25,000 Aboriginal people living in Ottawa, according to Statistics Canada. Just over 1,900 are high school age.

The idea of making Indigenous stories more visible is something that Sheila Grantham also thinks about. She teaches a first year Indigenous studies seminar at Carleton University, and helps her First Nations, Inuit and Métis students adapt to life in the university environment. Grantham says it’s necessary for Indigenous students to see themselves represented in the world around them because it helps them feel like they belong. For this reason, she often incorporates Indigenous books into her seminar.

“They deal with Indigenous experiences and ways of knowing,” she says, “which is really important in terms of where one comes from, and where one’s knowledge system comes from. I see that embedded in creative ways in fiction.”

### **Indigenous Pedagogy**

Educators who teach the course often walk a fine line of discussing the book’s themes without wading too deep into culture and Indigenous experience.

“If you’re coming from a settler point of view,” Bruton says, “you don’t have an Indigenous voice to share with students.”

The board trains their teachers to discuss topics in the texts, but also gives them the option to invite community partners and Elders into the classroom to lead discussions.

This is recommended for any conversations about culture, or simply as a way to enhance student learning. Representatives from the Wabano Centre and the Ottawa Inuit Children's Centre are frequently called upon.

Brown has found that community partners help students grasp the issues in books. She's also worked to incorporate some Indigenous pedagogy in her classes. In her smaller university prep class, she often has the students sit in a circle.

"At first they hated it," she explained. "But now they actually request it. They feel like it encourages a better dialogue, it encourages more conversation. They can actually see each other."

As well, Brown finds that her unfamiliarity with the subject matter can actually enhance learning, because it makes students more comfortable asking questions. "The best thing I did was to admit I'm not going to know everything," she says. She adds it helps students direct their own learning and feel less overwhelmed.

Alexander also notes that this course often requires educators to recognize the limits of their knowledge. "They need to give themselves permission to learn with their students," she says. "That's a shift. We're often expected to be the experts."

She also mentions that the teacher's lack of familiarity with the content can be a positive thing, because it can lead to more open environments where the teacher is studying new ideas with their students.

"With Indigenous learning there is more of that culture of being shoulder to shoulder, all together in it," says Alexander. "So let's explore the learning together."

**“Even if we’re told not to run this course next year, we’re probably still going to. We’re not giving up that easily.”**

**- Kelsey Brown, teacher**

Creating a new kind of learning can be costly, though. One of the biggest challenges is having the funds to buy class sets of new books. Inviting guests into the classroom, as well as teacher training, also require resources.

Last year, the OCDSB provided each school running the course with specific funding based on their student population. That money allowed teachers to host guests and purchase books. If funding becomes tight at the board level though, new schools might be challenged to run the course.

The Ontario government’s recent cuts to education could signal cause for concern. Last year the rewrite of the provincial curriculum, meant to increase Indigenous content, was cancelled. The upcoming budget may also announce further funding changes.

Brown, however, is determined to continue teaching Indigenous literature in her classroom. “We’re going ahead with it anyway,” she says. She now has full class sets of the novels she teaches, which is one of the biggest costs. “Even if we’re told not to run this course next year, we’re probably still going to. We’ll run grade 11 English, but we’ll use the books that we want to use,” she explains. “We’re not giving up that easily.”

## Response from Students

The course is still new for a lot of people, though. Brown says she often gets questions at the start of term from parents. “It’s never antagonistic in nature,” she says, explaining they mostly just want to know why the change is being made.

Bruton also notes that parents sometimes ask if their child will be prepared for grade 12 English. She assures them it’s not a concern, since the course still focuses on the same required skills.

Students, on the other hand, often ask why they’re learning Indigenous literature. Teachers usually have a classroom conversation about the Truth and Reconciliation Commission, Bruton says, and discuss the calls to action that focus on education.

“We explain this is why we’re doing it, that it’s important,” she says. “That it’s what we value in our society. Usually they get it.”

She also notes that there are many students who identify with the themes in the books on a different level. “There are students who have fled the results of colonization, who have dealt with atrocities in their home countries,” she says, “so they can relate to the colonial aspects that are in these novels. Many of our new Canadians can relate much more to Indigenous literature.”

It hasn’t all been seamless, though.

The one thing they’ve had to be careful with, Bruton says, is that some of the books deal with difficult subject matter. “There is some really heavy stuff,” she says, citing literature that tackles trauma, residential schools and addiction issues. She mentions that *The Break* by Katherena Vermette begins with a rape scene.

“But then again,” she notes, “we teach *The Kite Runner* without batting an eye, and there’s a rape scene in that book. And there’s a rape that’s referred to in *To Kill a Mockingbird*, which has been our grade nine novel for decades. So you just have to be careful.”

Brown also acknowledges that some of the themes are challenging. “I think the first year I shied away from some of the tougher stuff,” she says. She also references *The Break*, as well as *Seven Fallen Feathers* by Tanya Talaga. “They’re both really intense reads,” Brown admits, “but they handled it with such maturity. The kids really do surprise you.”

She points out there’s value to reading contemporary texts because they foster understanding about the residual effects of history. “The kids need to know there are still serious issues happening today as a result of what’s happened in the past.”



The story of Chanie Wenjack is depicted in student assignments in Kelsey Brown’s classroom. Photo Credit: Menaka Raman-Wilms

Despite all the challenges, Brown credits the course with bringing a new spark to her teaching. “It’s actually become a huge part of my life,” she says. It’s made her revamp her lessons and change the way she approaches difficult subjects in the classroom.

She says the course also benefits students. “I think this prepares you for life,” Brown says. “I love Shakespeare, but a lot of the literature we’re reading right now is so relevant to what’s going on in the world around us.”

Discussing some of the subject matter isn’t always easy, Brown acknowledges, but the positive outcomes make it worth it. “All I see really are benefits to teaching the course,” she says. “So we do our best.”