

**Transcript for Accessibility Bites: An Indigenous Lens on Disability Rights – Honouring Traditional Ecological Knowledge and Diverse Ways of Being
BCcampus webinar hosted on February 26, 2026**

Facilitator: Sue Sterling-Bur

Host: Helena Prins

HELENA PRINS:

Welcome, everyone. My name is Helena Prins, and I am an advisor on the learning and teaching team here at BCcampus, and I am just thrilled that we are here. This is the final session of our third Accessibility Bites season. So I think we should pull a "Gray's Anatomy" and maybe go to 20 seasons of Accessibility Bites or something like that. Just really excited for today's session as well with Sue Sterling-Burr. Sue, I hope you're ready. I'm ready to hand it over to you.

SUE STERLING-BUR:

k^wuk^wscémx^w Helena, thank you, Helena, for the introduction. sk^wéstkt Sue Sterling-Bur. My name is Sue Sterling-Bur. I come from the Nłeʔkepmx Nation, which is located in the Merritt area, and I'm here today to share an Indigenous lens on disability rights and honouring traditional ecological knowledge and the diverse ways of being. I'm currently completing my PhD with the University of British Columbia in the Okanagan, and I'm finishing my dissertation. So I'm at the very end of my journey of completing a PhD and super grateful that I'm hoping to defend in the summertime so that I can move forward and do more research in different areas.

So the purpose of this presentation today is to examine Indigenous students' rights within a post-secondary setting. It's looking at understanding Indigenous traditional ecological knowledge as a rights-based foundation. So essentially, Indigenous students are exercising inherent and legislative rights, and post-secondary institutions are obligated to uphold these rights for these students. Accessibility for Indigenous students must be proactive and rights based, and we must shift from accommodating to institutional obligation to provide accommodations and focus on Indigenous students with disabilities. I will be speaking about the Declaration of Rights for Indigenous Peoples Act here in British Columbia, but also the United Nations Declaration of Rights for Indigenous Peoples, the B.C. Accessibility Act, and how each of these can intertwine and how it can support advocacy within a public post-secondary.

So here I am sharing a photo of my family, and I am a mother. I'm a PhD student, but I'm also first and foremost, a mother. I have five children. These are my five kids and one of our very particular pets, Nala, our husky. And here in the centre area in the black T-shirt and the gray and black ball cap with black glasses is my son Darian. And my son Darian is one of my biggest inspirations. All of my kids are inspirations for me, but especially for Darian, he has really pushed us onto a journey of navigating the multitude of systems that we have here in British Columbia. Navigating the medical system, the health system, Child and Family Services, Youth Services, on reserve as we live off-reserve First Nation status, and there's a difference in services that we can receive on-reserve for First Nation status and off-reserve for First Nation

status people. So we've been navigating systems for quite a few. I would say the entire existence of his life. He is now 27-years-old and excuse me, he is a young, has grown into a very solid young man. When Darian was 9-years-old, he experienced a traumatic brain injury, and at that time, it was life altering, life altering for Darian, but life altering for us as a family as well, and how we could continue to support him with the drastic changes that took place for Darian. He had a one year of full recovery for his injury where he wasn't able to attend school or be in community at all. In the end, he ended up fracturing the left side of his skull and he had brain bleeding within his brain, and he spent a couple of weeks in the ICU before we could bring him home. And now he is navigating life. He has attended post-secondary. He will continue to live with a brain injury for the entire rest of his life. He will always need external supports. He will always require somebody there to help him navigate life in general. So while he was in post-secondary, he had quite a structured schedule. He had set classes. This is pre-COVID. He had set classes. He had excellent instructors. When he was in post-secondary, he was trying to complete his grade 12 requirements that he could graduate with a regular grade 12 diploma. And so we were working towards that and supporting Darian with that. He had great English faculty members. He had excellent support through their Success centre. And the universal design that was provided in the classroom with structure, with dimmed lights, with being able to see his teacher and having the classroom set up while addressing loud noises within the classroom, changing out light bulbs so that he didn't hear the humming of the lights in the classroom, it provided that consistency, routine, and external supports and reminders that he needed to be successful in that setting. And then COVID hit. And when COVID hit, Darian was working on his last two classes to graduate, and one of them was a math class. And unfortunately, when you move from being in a classroom setting to being online at home, trying to navigate algebra, it did not work well for him. And so here we are, six years later from COVID, it'll be six years in March, and he has yet to be able to go back to complete his math class. So that's something that we're trying to do, it really broke down his confidence in not being able to complete that one last class to graduate. And so we're working on building up his confidence again to return back to the school to complete his last class. And that's our hope for him.

So as I mentioned, my family is my inspiration, my family, my community. And, you know, my upbringing has really pushed me into a really solid understanding of who I am, where I come from, as an Indigenous person. And I have a very particular Indigenous standpoint as a First Nations woman growing up on a small community reserve in Merritt. And that's called traditional ecological knowledge. So from my perspective as an Indigenous person, is going to be very different from even my brother's perspective as an Indigenous man growing up in the same community. But at the basis of that are the value systems, the ecological system, the life system, the relational system that we've all learned in one particular setting. So Indigenous belief systems are based on traditional ecological knowledge. I'm going to call that TEK. So TEK can be called other names such as Indigenous Knowledge or native science, and it refers to a specific location and includes all of the relationships between plants, animals, natural phenomena, landscapes, and timing of events that are used to create a knowledge system and

life system. Living knowledge systems are rooted in land, language, and relationships. And for disability within this living knowledge system, it's understood as being relational and based upon giftedness.

So here in this photo, it shows a pictograph that was painted on the walls within the Stein Valley, which is located in the southern interior of British Columbia. And it is an ancient rock painting that shows the dreams and visions of past generations of people. The Stein is an Nlaka'pamux word, the nation I am from, and it means hidden place, and it's located at the mouth of the Stein River and the valley is barely noticeable. When you enter the Stein Valley, you enter a small community called Lytton, which is a part of the Nlaka'pamux Nation where I am from. And when you walk into the mouth opening, it actually opens up into this large valley. And when you hike into this valley, there are a number of these pictographs such as this one that's showing on the screen of a thunderbird and a deer and a goat. And it's depicting that relational aspect that everything is all interconnected. And so when we view our spirituality, when we view our life beings, when we view our value system, it's based upon this respectful relational model, which includes our family, our extended family, and our communities. And it holds great significance for us because it's depicted through our stories which come from our pictographs that we have within these valleys. They actually scattered all over our entire nation, and other nations have pictographs as well that they may have within their territories. And within our territory, we view it as $\text{xa}^{\text{?}}\text{xa}^{\text{?}}$ is what we call it. It's a very spiritual area. And our teachings for disability or differences or giftedness come from our teachings from the pictographs, based on our Nlaka'pamux Speta'kl and our Spilahem. Those are our personal and ancestral stories that we carry forward since time immemorial.

So Indigenous Peoples experience higher rates of disability than non-Indigenous Canadians. And this has been widely shown through the Canadian population statistics that we gather every four years. Disability maybe it is more studied and researched more for non-Indigenous populations than it is for Indigenous people. And so when I went forward to do a PhD, my whole intent and purpose was to do this for my children, was to show an understanding of us as Indigenous people, we don't view that difference as a deficit. We view it as a gift. We view it as every individual comes from our creator. And every child is special. So if a child sacrifices a piece of themselves, say they have a physical difference, their leg is twisted. We actually have Nlaka'pamux words that identify that their leg is twisted. It does not mean that they are not capable or that they're not able to do and contribute to our community. It means that they are requiring possibly extra support, or they might need to use a cane, but that they are here to contribute and work with us as an equal individual. So when we look at Indigenous groups, they're often under-represented in studies and many times through research projects, it's always neglecting to show the cultural, historical and geographical diversity of the Indigenous populations. So one other piece is that Indigenous women are more likely to have one or more disabilities than non-Indigenous women with a similar pattern between Indigenous and non-Indigenous men. Up to 45% of Indigenous women are more likely to experience severe or very severe disabilities than non-Indigenous women. So we take a look at the population in British

Columbia, we have over 270,000 people in B.C. who identify as Indigenous, which represents about 6% of the overall population in B.C. And then with that, up to 32% of First Nations people living urban settings off-reserve identify as having a disability, 30% of Métis people, 19% of Inuit live with a disability in comparison to 22% of British Columbia and Canadians. So you can see that there is a valid discrepancy shown even through Statistics Canada that Indigenous people are living with higher rates of disabilities. I also want to keep in mind that these are diagnosed disabilities. So if we look at the historical context of British Columbia and Canada through residential schools, through 60 Scoop, through colonization as a whole, we need to ensure that on top of a diagnosed disability, we add on the multitudes of trauma that individuals have experienced, the loss, the grief, you know, and one of the things that my research has shown is that the importance of culture and language and how it supports Indigenous people overall in their overarching health and wellness. So our people if Indigenous people don't have access to those pieces, then it's also providing a hindrance upon, or maybe not a hindrance but a challenge upon themselves over and above a disability they may or may not have been diagnosed with. So in British Columbia, I can comfortably say that there are extreme challenges and wait lists for individuals, anybody wanting to get a diagnosis, wanting to go through an assessment process to have their diagnosis. And securing their diagnosis is important because it provides us access and opens doorways and pathways for funding to be able to, potentially funding to be able to support our children or support our youth or support our adults. It provides access to some of the services where you have to have a diagnosed disability in order to access. So it is important for us to be able to access those diagnoses so that we can access those programs and supports. It's very similar within public post-secondaries as well or even private post-secondaries. Many times, the policies and procedures clearly identify for a student to even apply for supports or accommodations, they need to have a diagnosed disability. But I really need to highlight that many of our Indigenous students who track and go into post-secondary may never have had the opportunity to have an assessment completed for them. They may have lived in a rural and remote community. They may not have ever been identified or flagged to have an assessment within their school system. There's so many factors that can hinder an individual from accessing to be able to have a full assessment and diagnosis. So looking at the post-secondary's policies right from the get-go, that is one that I would flag that all post-secondaries need to work with Indigenous Peoples to come up with the system where students can still access accommodations without that diagnosed disability.

So when we're thinking about public post-secondaries, they were not designed with Indigenous learners with an Indigenous understanding of disability or difference or giftedness. They were not designed with students who are required to adapt or they are actually designed for students where they're required to adapt to the system that is in place. These systems are not always necessarily required to adapt to our students is what I have found from my experience. Post-secondaries are unfortunately, at times, an extended arm of a colonial education system that marginalizes Indigenous ways of knowing. There's persistently systemic barriers, there's financial barriers, there's access actual in the community barriers. There's compounded barriers for students who are living with disabilities where we may compound and add on poverty and

trauma, et cetera. There's a high need for culturally grounded approaches to be injected into public post-secondaries. Indigenous students with disabilities are often invisible within institutions. As I mentioned, they may be coming into the post-secondary without a diagnosis. So when they enter the post-secondary institution, they're starting off already without support, without the instructor knowing that the student is coming into the post-secondary classroom, that they need extra support. They may need extensions, et cetera. So these students may be invisible within the institution. And then the student may or may not have the confidence to self-advocate for themselves and reach out for help. So there are a number of gaps where the current gaps that I have seen are the medicalized accommodation processes, the reversed requirement of having a diagnosed disability or going into your health practitioner, your doctor, your nurse practitioner, and requiring a multitude of documents filled out before a student can even access accommodations as well. That hinders our health system, that hinders the student from getting access. They may not have the funding to pay for the doctor to fill out the paperwork. There's just a multitude of challenges of getting access to accommodations in the post-secondary. There's maybe limited cultural safety in the accessibility services or accommodations provided, not just from the support staff that are hired within the post-secondary, but within every individual classroom. Some instructors may be more accommodating and others may not, and everybody has the right to their belief system. But at the foundation and at the whole, there needs to be a framework of support that's provided for Indigenous students that includes Indigenous students and Indigenous knowledge.

Here I'm sharing a Rights Framework: Impacting Indigenous Students in Post-Secondary. So this framework, I've identified the United Nations Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples at the top left, a brief description of their purpose, so international affirmations of Indigenous Peoples' inherent rights. The key provisions for Indigenous students: education without discrimination, protection of culture, language, and knowledge, full participation and accessibility to post-secondary. So potential post-secondary implications is institutions must respect Indigenous knowledge systems and provide culturally appropriate accessible education. I've done the similar aspect with the Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples Act for here in British Columbia, which was adopted in 2019, November 2019. And the post-secondary implications for DRIPA is that public post-secondary institutions must align governance policies and practices with Indigenous rights in British Columbia. The B.C. Accessibility Act requires institutions to move beyond accommodation towards inclusive design and planning. The post-secondaries for B.C., British Columbia contexts, integration of Indigenous rights, accessibility, and reconciliation across all programs and services. So there are specific articles under UNDRIP. Article 14, the right to establish and control education systems, access to education without discrimination. Disability and well-being articles, there's two, Article 22 and Article 24. Measures are implemented to ensure Indigenous Peoples with disabilities enjoy rights without discrimination and the right to health and maintain traditional medicines and health practices for supporting individuals with disabilities. I wanted to ensure they shared a snapshot with post-secondaries and staffing to understand that these are rights-based advocacy work that we need to be doing for our students.

This is an advocacy map on this slide. And this shows common entry points for post-secondaries, where the Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples in British Columbia can be used in institutions. It would be very similar across Canada for others who are in other provinces. But you can do the work by implementing within policies and governance. Academic Senate, Education Council, Indigenous Engagement and Reconciliation offices, strategic planning and Indigenous frameworks, not an add-on for Indigenous Peoples for your strategic plans, but actually incorporating it right from the foundation. For student supports, accessible services and accommodations can be adjusted to include Indigenous content. For example, includes Elders, Knowledge Keepers, Indigenous students centres, counseling and health services, ensuring that there's access to Indigenous health services and counsellors, housing, financial aid, and transportation. You can also implement it into the systems in accessibility program reviews, quality insurances, capital planning. How are you building the environment? How are you inclusive of Indigenous content and knowledge from that Indigenous group from that territory? Procurement, digital accessibility. Are we adjusting it to ensure that Indigenous agencies or people can apply and report complaints.

With that, I'm going to finish my presentation with four key recommendations that I have for all post-secondaries. The first one is to hire an Indigenous disability navigator. Create Indigenous led navigator roles that are bridging Indigenous services within the community and within the city that they're located and the accessibility offices within the post-secondary. There are sometimes going to be times and spaces and places where students are going to have to access services outside of the post-secondary, and it can be very challenging to know where to go. Provide advocacy and coordinated support. And if you have an Indigenous-led navigator, it reduces the burden on the self-advocacy for the student and is inclusive of Elders and Knowledge Keepers support. These Indigenous-led roles, they can bridge accessibility services, Indigenous students support, Elders, et cetera, so that students don't carry the coordination burden of their accommodations by themselves.

My recommendation number two is co-develop policies. Align the Declaration of Rights of Indigenous Peoples or UNDRIP with your post-secondary. So accessibility policies with Indigenous Peoples. The key word is "with Indigenous Peoples." Look in your backyard, look at the community and the territory and the nation that you are from. Reach out to Elders, reach out to Knowledge Keepers, reach out to the First Nations and request that they become involved in what that accommodation and support system looks like for Indigenous students in your post-secondary. Include Indigenous students with disabilities. They are the ones who understand best what they require and what they need. The Declaration of Rights of Indigenous People provides a legal and policy mandate. It shifts the responsibilities from not only students, but to institutions, and it requires accountability of the institution as well. Most importantly, it creates Indigenous voices and includes their lived experiences in the policies and how they're provided for students.

Recommendation three, support the academic faculty and leaders to embed land-based and cultural learning within the entire institution. Ensure that everyone has access to ceremonies or in the field learning. Applying UDL, it's very beneficial and honour the multiple ways of demonstrating across cultures. Expand accommodations beyond just the paperwork. Make sure that there's belonging, safety, access to culture, land, and community centres our relational accountability between students, families, nations, and the institution. It's all of our responsibility, not just the students to advocate for them and support land-based, strengths-based trauma-informed approaches for these students that reduce barriers.

Last recommendation. A rights-based accessibility framework. I know that there is a lot of advocacy work that takes place for the rights of people living with disabilities, but we do need to go one step further for the Indigenous Peoples here in Canada. We are the First Peoples of this land, and we have a right to education without discrimination. We have a right to culturally safe and accessible environments, and we have a right to support reflecting Indigenous worldview within the post-secondaries, who are educating our people. Indigenous students are exercising their inherent and legislative rights, and post-secondary institutions are obligated to uphold these rights. We can be leaders as post-secondary institutions in this country to ensure that we are dedicating and following a rights-based accessibility framework. Dedicate funding to Indigenous disability supports. Use Indigenous data, measure holistic outcomes, and report out to community. k^wuk^wscémx^w. I know it's 12:28. We've got 2 minutes for questions.

HELENA:

You're amazing, Sue. Well done. And I did put a prompt in the chat if people have questions if they want to put in. I just wrote down when you said we should expand accommodations beyond the paperwork. That's such a beautiful sentence. And let's aim to do just that. If there are any questions, we invite you to maybe type it up just in the interest of time. We have 1 minute left. There's lots of appreciation for you. Someone said, I agree with your recommendations, especially number four. Lots of thank you's.

SUE:

Thank you. I do have my contact info in the presentation. I believe it's the second last slide. If anybody has questions, please feel free to follow up, or if you want to have more of a conversation about a rights-based accessibility framework for your post-secondary, I am more than happy to have conversations around that.

HELENA:

And Sue, I know that the slide show also ends with a video. Since there's no questions, maybe you just want to tell them what this video is that they can watch at home.

SUE:

Sure. So the last slide on this presentation is a video called "Indigenous Disability and Education." And it is geared towards public school systems, so the K to 12, but it can be used for

anybody. I think one of the key factors for Indigenous beliefs is that we follow a life cycle approach. It doesn't begin and end at a certain age. It is fluid and it is circular and it's always continuing. So this video can be found on YouTube, Indigeneity and Disabilities in Schools. It was done by Inclusion BC, and it's about a 3-minute video that will show you a small snippet of Indigenous belief systems for disabilities. Thank you. With that, we wrap up the accessibility by Season three. We look forward to seeing you all back in the fall, and I want to thank Sue for ending us on this wonderful note and lots of work for us to do. I saw that comment in the chat. There's still so much work to do. Thank you, Sue and thank you everyone for being here. Thank you.