Under The Mango Tree: Decolonizing Education Using Lessons From Ghanaian Schools, Communities, and Museums

By

Allison Balabuch

MA, University of Victoria, 2012

BEd, University of British Columbia, 1998

BA, University of British Columbia, 1997

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

In the Department of Curriculum and Instruction

©Allison Balabuch, 2026

University of Victoria

All rights reserved. This dissertation may not be reproduced in whole or in part, by photocopy or other means, without the permission of the author.

We acknowledge and respect the Lək̓wəŋən (Songhees and Xwsepsəm/ Esquimalt) Peoples on whose territory the university stands, and the Lək̓wəŋən and W̱SÁNEĆ Peoples whose historical relationships with the land continue to this day.

Under The Mango Tree: Decolonizing Education Using Lessons From Ghanaian Schools, Communities, and Museums

By

Allison Balabuch

MA, University of Victoria, 2012

BEd, University of British Columbia, 1998

BA, University of British Columbia, 1997

Supervisory Committee

Dr. Kathy Sanford, Supervisor
Department of Curriculum and Instruction

Dr. Ann Stahl, Committee Member
Department of Anthropology

Dr. Bruno de Oliveira Jayme, Committee Member
Faculty of Education, University of Manitoba

Abstract

Public education systems globally are built on a colonial model that privileges Western knowledge and pedagogy at the cost of local and Indigenous knowledge systems. This dissertation explores how insights from communities, schools, and museums in Ghana can inform the decolonization of public education. Driven by questions regarding how the school system must change to better meet student needs, this research identifies and challenges entrenched colonial structures that prioritize theoretical models over practical and embodied local knowledge systems. The study employs a post-qualitative, rhizomatic methodology, following the encounters, entanglements, and assemblages of learning events that glowed. The key findings are presented through thematic "story vines" that emphasize four transformative shifts: 1) reimagining educational spaces that move beyond rigid colonial structures toward flexible, community-centered learning environments, 2) valuing embodied, experiential learning through examples of traditional practices such as weaving, potting, and glass bead making—which integrate math, science, and history while fostering environmental sustainability and a deep connection to the land, 3) prioritizing and valuing local and Indigenous knowledge in schools, and 4) the need for the co-creation of educational resources between researchers, educators, and local knowledge keepers to replace pervasive deficit models of Africa with narratives of innovation and historical truth. I argue that decolonization requires the dismantling of rigid colonial timetables and disciplinary silos to make space for slow, embodied pedagogy. By thinking locally and working together across disciplines, educators can challenge the colonial system and build a more equitable future rooted in relational accountability, respect, and reciprocity.

Table of Contents

Supervisory Committee ……..……ii
Abstract ……..…iii
Table of Contents ……..….iv
Dedication ……..…vii
Chapter One: Introduction……..…1
The making of me ……..……2
Language and identity ……5
The making of a traveler… and a researcher ……..…8
The making of an artist and a photographer ……10
The making of a teacher ……...……11
Research question ……...……...……14
The making of this dissertation……...……...……15
Images are not neutral ……...…...……16
Photographic choices ……...……17
The politics of photography ……...……...……18
Photo credits ……...……...……21
Original Artwork ……...……...……21
Digital Tools ……...……22
Citations ……...……22
A road map for the reader ……...……...…23
Chapter Two: Research Process ……..…….27
Public education ……...……28
Encounters ……...……32
Transcendence vs. immanence ……33
Vines: a relational onto-epistemology ……..……34
Ontology ……...……37
Epistemology ……...……38
The colonial image of education ……..39
Relationality ……42
Reality is relational ……..45
Post-qualitative research ……...46
Rhizomes ……..47
Assemblage and entanglement ……49
Thinking without image ……50
Refusing method ……...51
The event of learning ……52
Research encounters ……54
Encountering archaeology, Dr. Ann Stahl, and Banda ……54
Encountering Ghana - Part 1 ……56

Encountering systemic racism about Africa in education ……60
Encountering Ghana - Part 2 ……63
Dealing with data ……67
What is data? ……67
Plugging in……69
The messiness of transcriptions ……70
Assemblage wall ……73
Story vines ……79
Chapter Three: Glass Beads - Does where we teach matter? Rethinking notions of educational spaces ……80
Cedi Beads ……82
Educational spaces ……86
'Ideal' spaces ……87
Museum as family home ……91
Red Clay Studio ……97
Mole National Park ……99
University Field School ……101
Power ……104
Looking forward ……106
Chapter Four: Weaving - Does how we teach matter? Decolonizing education through weaving Indigenous ways of learning into our schools ……107
Why weaving? ……110
Indigenous models of learning ……111
Learning and teaching weaving ……112
Experiential or embodied learning ……117
Learning is relational ……121
Learning is connected to the land ……123
Slow pedagogy ……125
Looking forward ……127
Chapter Five: Potting - Does what we teach matter? The importance of including local and Indigenous knowledge in schools and museums. ……128
The story of pots ……130
Florence's story about slow craftsmanship ……135
Intergenerational transmission of knowledge ……137
A long history of potting in Ghana……138
The role of education ……139
Women's work ……140
Environmental sustainability ……144
Teaching potting in schools ……145
Looking forward ……148

Chapter six: Fish traps - Whose voices matter? Decolonizing education through the co-creation of educational resources ……150

Learning resources ……152
Textbook troubles ……...154
The voyage of Ann Stahl ……....…156
Fish traps ……157
Community ……158
Who is in the book? ……163
Youth voices ……..…165
Making (re)sources ……167
Understanding.……...….170
Writing about research in accessible ways ……..……172
Looking forward ……175
Chapter seven: Learnings, implications, and reflections ……177
Valuing local knowledge systems and pedagogies ……179
Thinking locally ……182
Dismantling the bell schedule ……...…….184
Telling truths about Africa ……..186
Working together ……..……188
Implications for research ……189
Reflections ……..190
References ……...……192

Dedication

I would like to thank all of the community members, educators, knowledge keepers, and students in Ghana for sharing their time and their knowledge with me. Thank you also to all the archaeologists who were willing to talk with me about their research and engage in conversations about Africa that have changed my understanding of the past, present, and future of a continent that is more often than not misrepresented or omitted from public education globally.

Thank you Kathy Sanford for your support, your guidance, and your friendship along my journey. You are a role model for all strong women who are working for change.

Thank you Ann Stahl for taking me on a wild adventure to Ghana and into the fascinating world of African archaeology. I learn something new every time we talk.

Thank you Bruno de Oliveira Jayme for your guidance throughout my PhD journey.

Thank you William Gblerkpor for inspiring me to reconsider education from different angles and introducing me to the museum at Shai.

Thank you to the community of graduate students and professors that I have had the privilege to get to know over the past 5 years. No one should try to do this journey alone.

Thank you Kristy McLeod and Sunny Jun for all of our conversations about life, (de) colonialism, anti-racism, and the pursuit of better education.

Thank you Nabila Kazmi for walking beside me and always being there to talk through all of my ideas, my struggles, and my learning - one sticky note at a time.

Thank you to my family for always listening to me talk about my work and for supporting me with unconditional love, patience, and food.

Finally, thank you to all my students - past and present - for constantly inspiring me to improve as a teacher and a learner. This work has all been for you.

Chapter One: Introduction



Vancouver Island, Canada, 2020

The making of me

"*We could make that*," was a sentence heard throughout my childhood. It was said by different adults with different tones depending on the context. It was usually said when we wanted to buy something we didn't need but it was more often said when we expressed an idea about something - a vision, a project, a game that we wanted to play. These creative ideas were fostered from the moment we could understand the concept of *making*.

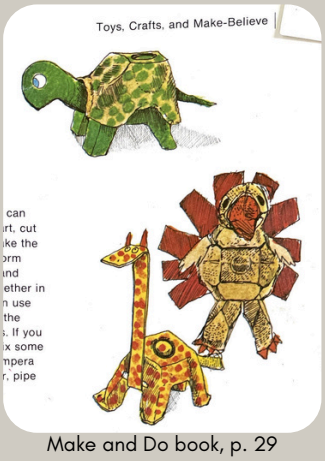
Imagination was valued.

As a child growing up before the internet, we had a globe, a complete set of the *World Book Encyclopedia* and the accompanying Childcraft set of books. Our favorite book in the Childcraft series was the *Make and Do* book which began with an invitation to make yourself a craft box.



Our childhood encyclopedia set and *Make and Do* book

"A craft box is like a magic box. You put in a lot of junk and ordinary things. Then you add the magic ingredients – a little glue, some paint, a piece of string, your imagination." (Introduction page, Make and Do Book, 1985)



Make and Do book, p. 29

My siblings and I exhausted the pages of the *Make and Do* book trying to make everything that we could find the supplies for. (Our goal was to make everything in the book.) Making something in my family could be as simple as following the instructions for animals made of egg cartons or puppets made out of toilet paper rolls. My sister and I even learned how to remove the roll from a full toilet paper roll and put it back on the holder - we never had enough saved in the craft box.

Making also included learning to build furniture, sew clothing, and make a fort out of abandoned junk in our yard. Making was creative but also collaborative - my siblings and I often created together but we also had the gift of parents and extended family that spent the time to share their skills and knowledge with us.



My sister Sarah surrounded by making supplies at our kitchen table, Dauphin, Manitoba, Canada, c. 1980

When I was very young, my parents built a log house in Manitoba. With the help of friends and family, they did each step by hand. We, as children, were not sent away - we were there at the building site.



Me sitting on the loader, 1976

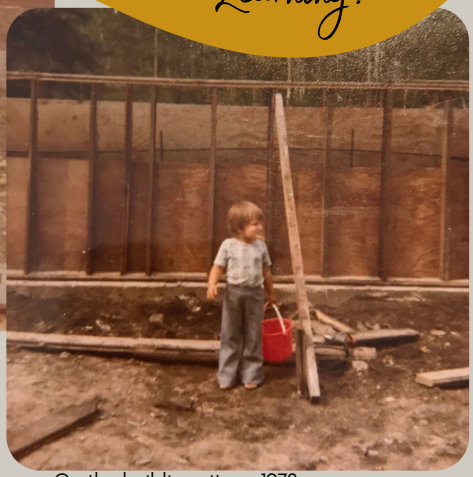
Watching.

Listening.

Learning.



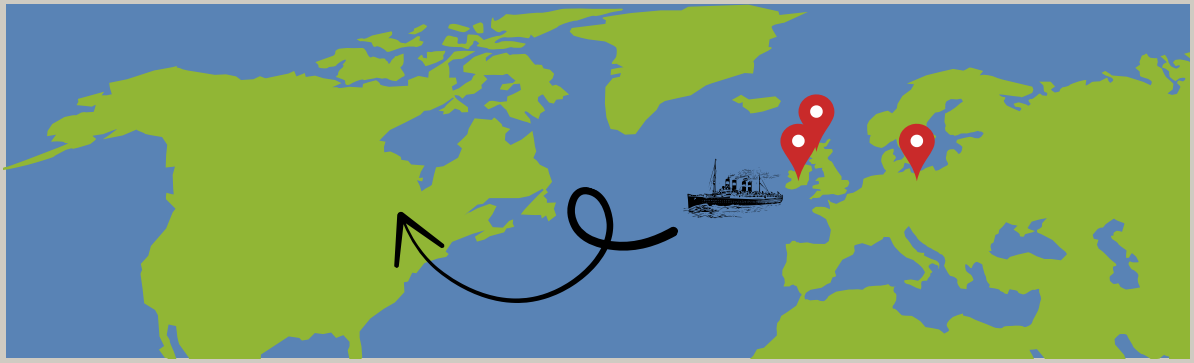
Learning from Ted Skwarok, family friend.



On the building site, c.1978

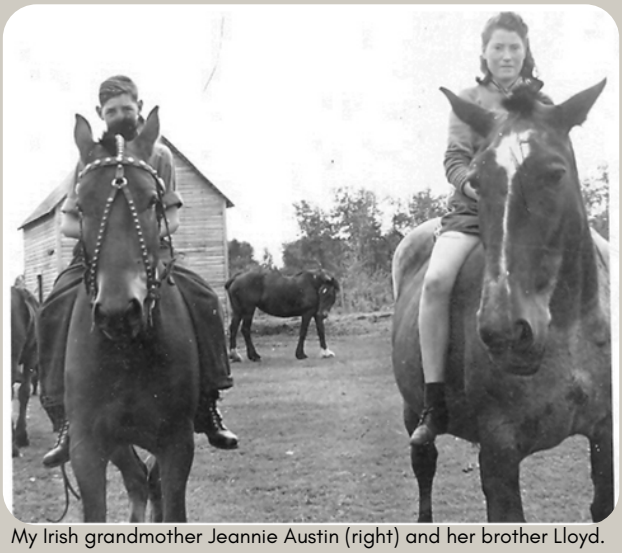
Making could be as small as a drawing or as big as a house.

I come from mixed settler ancestry from immigrants who came to Canada at different points over the past 200 years. Adventuring, fleeing, and seeking new opportunities for their families, they came primarily from Ireland, Scotland, and Poland.



By ship, horse, train and sheer determination, they build new lives on lands far from home.

They learned to farm when they weren't farmers and they learned to survive long winters in what is now the provinces of Ontario and Manitoba.



My Irish grandmother Jeannie Austin (right) and her brother Lloyd.



The log house in Dauphin, Manitoba and the school bus that became our temporary home, June, 1984.

When I was 9 years old, my parents bought a school bus and packed up their three children to move to the west coast of Canada from Manitoba. Leaving their recently finished log home behind, fleeing winter, and once again seeking new and better opportunities for themselves and their children.
With a list of towns that offered French Immersion programs, we camped all over Vancouver Island until they found a place that felt like home.

Language and identity

Colonialism has a complicated impact on identity and learning. As settler families moved to Canada, learning the English or the French language were paramount to success. Globally, English (and French) were used as languages of power.

The legacy of these family journeys is that I did not grow up on the lands of my ancestors nor did I speak their languages.

We spoke only English at home - even though my father, Reg, discovered as an adult that his father spoke Polish when he overheard him to talking to an elderly Polish neighbor. He asked my grandfather why he had never taught him. My grandfather Johnny explained that it just wasn't done - when you moved to Canada, you tried to fit in with English culture. And... you especially didn't want to speak Polish in a town of mostly Ukrainian immigrants.



Front row: My grandmother Jeannie (Austin) Balabuch, my grandfather Johnny Balabuch, my great-grandfather Joseph (Jozef) Balabuch and my great-grandmother Nellie (Rogosz) Balabuch. Back: Mike Tanas and my great-aunt Ann (Balabuch) Tanas, 19xx

"English was the official vehicle and the magic formula for elitedom"
(Ngugi Wa Thiong'O, 2005, p. 12)

For Indigenous peoples globally, local languages and ways of knowing and being were systemically attacked through colonial systems. As Marie Battiste (2013) and Carolyn Roberts (2024) outline in their work - we are so deeply entrenched in the colonial system that we cannot always see what has been normalized, what has been wielded to control people and economic interests in the the name of progress.

This is a common story for Canadians with settler ancestry. The message was to leave behind your language and cultural practices and fit yourself into the French or English norm. The impact of colonization on families such as mine is a cultural disconnect. I have always found it perplexing identity-wise to be an Irish-Scottish-Pole who speaks English, French and some very basic Japanese.

I found the food-dress-dance cultural days at school stressful - I had no personal connection to wearing a kilt or a babushka (even if my sister adopted the fashion for a period when she was about 5 years old).



My sister Sarah, inspired by the Ukrainian ladies in our town in her babushka, c. 1980.

What did I have to share about a culture I didn't know?

Further complicating my identity, my parents enrolled me in one of the first French Immersion programs in Canada in the late 1970s - a program that provides education in French from kindergarten to grade 12 for students who do not speak French at home. I have taught in this same program for the past 25 years.

In the French Immersion program, I was immersed in French culture as well as language further complicating my identity.

La ceinture fléchée was an important cultural teaching of my childhood at school. We made them, we wore them for Carnaval and Festival du voyageur... but we were also told very clearly that we were not francophones. I grew up wearing one at school but I could not wear one now. *You can appreciate our culture but you do not belong to it.*



Ceinture fléchée, an important symbol of the Métis people as well as French Canadians

The impacts of colonialism are complicated.

These experiences of cultural identity and family have shaped who I am as a decolonizing, feminist educator and researcher. Through the process of reflecting on my own journey through education, I have thought a lot about what I had actually learned while I was growing up.



My grandfather James Garland and my grandmother Allison (Little) Garland, c.1955

I learned how my grandfather James was an artist and a photographer.
He used to sew gowns for my grandmother to wear at Officers' balls when he was in the Royal Canadian Air Force.



My grandfather Johnny Balabuch with his 'cooker', c. 1980

I learned that my grandfather Johnny was an inventor. He could build anything. He had skill and imagination.

I learned that my grandmothers, Jeannie and Allison, were strong women who worked at a time when women were expected to stay home.

They were women who spoke their minds. They were adventurers.

I was gifted with my grandmothers' names and also their stories.



My grandmother Jeannie (Austin) Balabuch, Department of Defense steno pool, c. 1943



My grandmother Allison (Little) Garland (L), Registered nurse with her lifelong friend Irene (McRae) Killick (R), May 15, 1934

What I really learned is that gender roles don't need to conform to society's norms. I was equally welcomed by my father Reg on his fishing boat as I was with my Granny Allison trying to learn to crochet - even when she wasn't a patient teacher.

The making of a traveler... and a researcher

Through my love for our globe and our reference books, I also learned to be a traveler.



When we were young, my sister and I would spin the globe with our eyes closed to find our travel 'destination'. The next step in this virtual adventure was to read the appropriate section of the *World Book Encyclopedia* to learn about the country of random choice and then back to the *Make and Do* book to see inspiration for what we might need to make.

Donning lion masks made from paper plates for our visit to Kenya or mastering the correct way to build the Great pyramid of Giza from Lego, our travels took us around the globe.

Perhaps looking back, this was also the beginning of myself as a researcher.

It was when I learned that the world was filled with fascinating places.

It was when I learned that I wanted to learn more.

It's where I learned that everywhere had something to teach me.

My first international travels were in my early 20s and it was history and my continual thirst for knowledge that drove my choice of destinations. I will always take a long, hot day hiking around ancient ruins or hours in a museum over a day at the beach. Because of this love for history, I have always taken much too many pictures of things - amphorae, statues, and swords...



Amphorae, Museum of Underwater Archaeology, Bodrum, 2013



Bead mold in Kumasi, Ghana, 2022

I often take these photos thinking about how I could use them to teach my students about the fascinating histories of the world.

The photo would spark an idea for something we could *make*.



Attempt with students in Canada to make glass beads in Ghanaian style, 2023



Learning more about glass beads from Mr. Cedi, Ghana, 2023

I would ask myself:

How can I create an educational resource or activity that will share my enthusiasm about a place or the people I met?

How can I transform my knowledge, photos, and experiences into stories that will capture the imagination and curiosity of my students?

The making of an artist and a photographer

I got my first camera in 1984 at the age of 9. My first photographs were taken at my grade 4 year-end trip. I remember trying to capture the beauty of the scenery before we moved away to the unknown West Coast.

Here is what may be a stream somewhere is Manitoba. (It may be a lake or a ditch as well - I was not versed yet in metadata.)
I was very proud of the composition at the time.



Manitoba, Canada, 1984.

I also began drawing at a very young age. As *making culture* was encouraged in our family, so was painting and drawing. I wanted to be an artist when I grew up.



Here is a drawing I did at age 4. It was the first time I ever got both feet to look the same. I had been working on that goal for some time and I remember how excited I was to bring my drawing home from daycare to show my parents and my sister. I knew they would all be proud.

"Through the act of drawing, children's thought, body and emotion unite" (Susan Wright, 2010, p.12).

The personal tension between being an artist/maker and an academic followed me into my undergraduate degree at UBC. Finally declaring my major in International Relations in my fourth year, I spent an equal amount of time in Fine Arts studios and classes as I did in Political Science and history.

Meanwhile... I had been teaching on the side. I discovered that in teaching there was space for both the academic and the artist.



The researcher and the traveler.

The feminist and the activist.

The photographer and the historian.

The making of a teacher

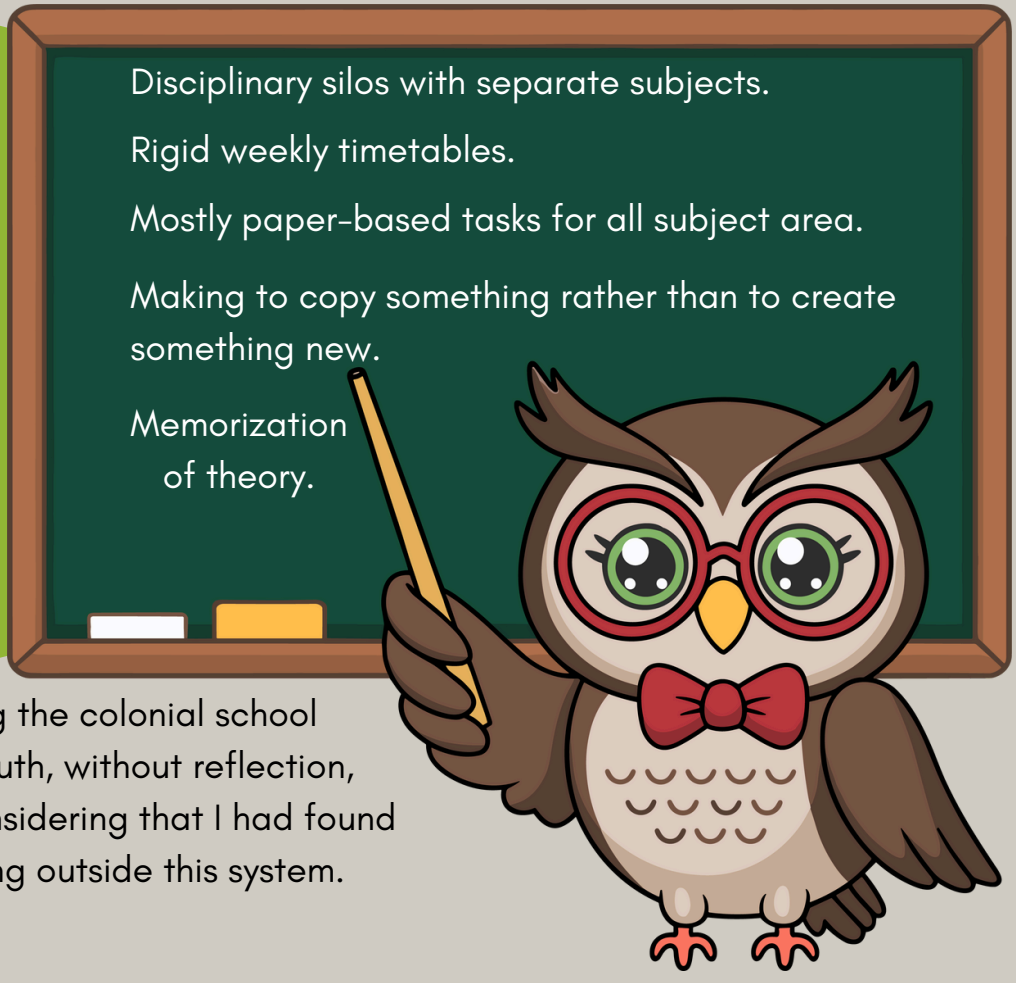
During my undergraduate degree at the University of British Columbia (UBC), I got a job teaching English as an additional language to Japanese students. Through the experience of teaching myself to teach - I discovered that my passion for learning extended to teaching as well. Rather than my intended career path of International Law, I extended my stay at UBC and took my Bachelor of Education.

In 1998, due to a lack of jobs in Vancouver, Canada, I set off to London, England to begin my career as a teacher. I spent 2 years teaching in the very proscribed format of the then new Numeracy and literacy hour - a structure that dictates learning down to the minute in classrooms across the UK (Robin Campbell, 2005). A structure that didn't feel right to me but at that point, I wasn't sure why.

Returning to Canada in 2000, I got my first contract teaching in French Immersion - I have taught grades 3-8 in this program since that time.

When I began teaching, I taught the way I had been taught - using a colonial framework.

"Settler colonialism isn't something one just gets over; it's woven into all aspects of our experience" (Daniel Heath Justice, 2018, p. 48).



I was replicating the colonial school system of my youth, without reflection, and without considering that I had found my joy of learning outside this system.

It only took me a few years in my classroom in Canada to begin to feel that something was wrong. Most students were disengaged with school - uninspired by the content and retaining very little information from one school year to the next. The only students who showed engagement were motivated by letter grades and not by the learning itself.

I started to plan in an interdisciplinary way, because it made more sense to me.



Keira Lane learning about the science, the history, and the making of metal coins, Victoria, Canada, 2019

Why should we not be learning the vocabulary in French class, writing and reading about the history from our Social Studies curriculum?

Why are we graphing random data in Math class when we could be looking at the same themes as our Social Studies class?

Why aren't we making things rather than just reading about them?

Confused as to how to file their work in their binders, a student asked me one day... "Does this go in the Social Studies section? or the math section? I'm confused..." It was that day that I removed the dividers and I threw out the timetable and we began to approach learning in a more organic way. Starting with the curriculum and a theme, I planned units that included Social Studies, Language Arts, Science, Math, and Art.







Theme: Calendars - Math, Social Studies, Science, Arts Education, Language Arts. Student project (right) - calendar showing the balance of conflict, peace, wealth and poverty in Ethiopian history. Victoria, Canada

> “What then is the relation between thinking and making? To this, the theorist and the craftsman would give different answers. It is not that the former only thinks and the latter only makes, but that the one makes through thinking and the other thinks through making” (Tim Ingold, 2013, p. 6).

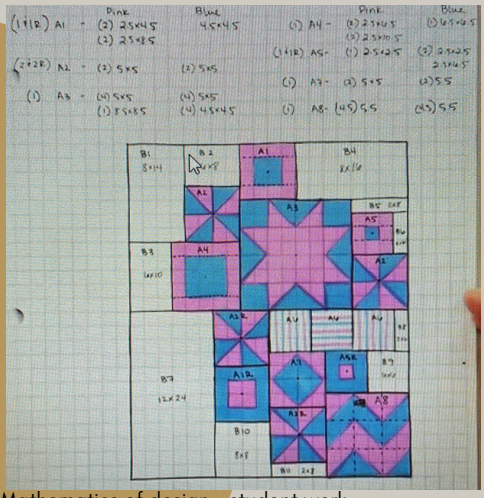
The more I integrated student learning across disciplines, the more I centered hands-on experiences, and creative and critical thinking - the more engaged the students became. We were thinking and making.

Instead of theory first, we wove theory and practice throughout each theme.



Designing and making

Quilting project: Math, Social Studies, Language Arts, Art Education



Mathematics of design - student work



Rich literature about textiles from many locations and cultures globally.

It is the culmination of these life experiences as a student, an artist, a traveler, and a teacher that have shaped the making of making of my research. I wanted to investigate how we can decolonize the education system to make it more meaningful and useful for students.

Research question

I began my doctoral journey looking to better understand what school should (or could) be - how it could change to better meet the needs of students and inspire them to be lifelong learners. How can we better include the richness and depth of hands-on, experiential learning - *the making* - with the theory taught in traditional school systems? I began with the question:



Learning chemistry through traditional wool dying, Victoria, Canada, 2023

How do we improve public education?



Me in Akanyakrom, Ghana, 2022 getting ready to document fish trap making.

My openness to learn led me to spend my research journey with African and Africanist archaeologists as well as Ghanaian educators and knowledge keepers in Ghana. Like spinning the globe as a child, I did not decide on the location of my research - the incredible country of Ghana found me. And, as I did as a child, my first step was to learn about Ghana, and originally the community of Banda, through research.

At the beginning of my research journey, digital archives, archaeologist Dr. Ann Stahl, and the internet replaced the encyclopedia and, thankfully, there were a lot more photos than my childhood encyclopedias.

My research question became:

What can we learn from communities, schools, and museums in Ghana to decolonize education globally?

I would like to express deep gratitude to the communities in Ghana for welcoming me in their schools, their museums, and their workshops and for sharing their knowledge with me over the past 5 years.

The making of this dissertation

"Traditional qualitative research largely treats form and content as two separate entities. For example, photographs and photography might form an important part of the data collection and analysis process in a traditional qualitative study. However, the findings and analysis are often rendered textually" (Vivek Vellanki, 2022, p.134-135).

Throughout this dissertation, I have made the deliberate choice to place the visual in an equal position to the written word. As an artist and a photographer, I have spent my life trying to capture the world I am experiencing but also trying to share those experiences and stories through visual representations as well as my words.

Words are rarely sufficient.

"While image is, text is always about"
(Nick Sousanis, 2015, p. 58).

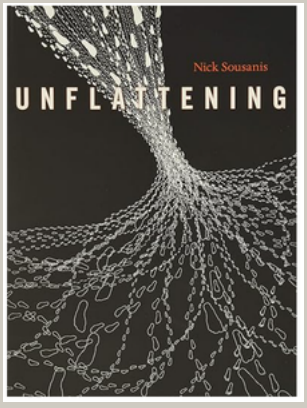
Rather than include images as numbered figures, often found on other pages of a text, I have placed the images with the text. My goal was to make each page 50 percent visual and 50 percent textual.

I invite you to read the text and images as equal voices telling the story together.

Sometimes the images need the text and other times, the text needs the image.

I was greatly inspired by the richness and experience reading the visual dissertation of Maureen Burdock (2021) - a graphic novel about generational trauma called *Queen of Snails*, the graphic novel dissertation *Unflattening* by Nick Sousanis (2015), and the book *Dear Data* by Giorgia Lupi and Stephanie Posavec (2016).







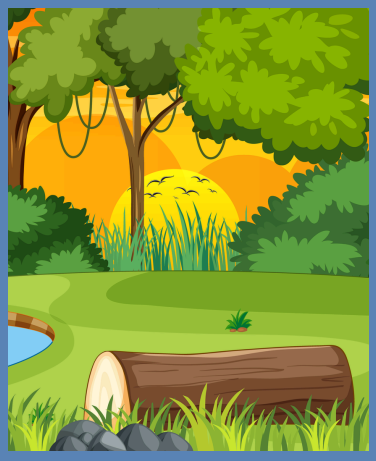
Images are not neutral

Errol Morris (2014) and Arielle Aïsha Azoulay (2024) talk about how all images are partial - they always include something while simultaneously excluding something else. A photograph is an encounter between the photographer, the camera, the photographed, and the spectator or audience.

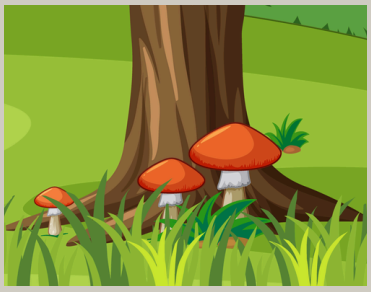




The photographer chooses which elements are included in the photographic frame. Once the photograph is taken, the spectator only has access to the frame and not the context.



Is the photo a commentary on logging in the area?



Are we interested in the beautiful shade of red of the mushrooms?



Is the photographer interested in healthy water sources? Or the beauty of the water lilies?

Once a photo is in circulation, its meaning shifts through the circulation or usage of the photo. The meaning also shifts as you, the audience, reads the photo using your own life experiences as a filter. You would look at these images differently as a hiker, mushroom forager, or climate activist.

Elizabeth Edwards (2012) describes a photograph as an object that has a social biography or a life of its own that is constantly in flux.



Me near Sabiye, Ghana taking photos of Owusu Alexander harvesting raffia palms for weaving, 2022. Photo credit: Zonke Guddah

I took the photographs used in this dissertation for a multitude of reasons but in each case I, as the photographer, was making a conscious choice of what would be in the frame and what would not.

photographic choices

Some of the photos are documentation of local knowledge and practices, land, people, and the non-human in Ghana. They are a part of the visual record of my experiences and my learning.



Fish trap making materials. Photo taken to document types of plants. Akanyakrom, Ghana, 2022

Gillian Rose (2023) describes this type of photography as descriptive photo-documentation. Accompanying these photos, I kept written descriptions, labels, and metadata.
Many of these photos were taken in order to explain or teach someone about what I had learned in school resources and lessons.

Some of the photos in this dissertation were originally motivated purely by aesthetics. I knew they would be beautiful photographs. Something in the light, the composition, the colours, and the shapes would speak to me as an artist.



Dzobo Reuben twisting vines into rope, Akanyakrom, Ghana, 2022

Some photos were taken for both reasons: aesthetics and photo-documentation. I took this photo to document the process of twisting vines into rope for fish trap making.
I took the photo from this particular angle because I knew it would be a beautiful image based on principles of design such as height, angle, and viewpoint (Jeremy Webb, 2020).

Some photographs have been used more than once to draw your mind back to what you have already read to make connections as a reader.

The politics of photography

The aesthetic and the mimetic aspects of photos are often separated but this oversimplifies how we interact with photographs as both a photographer or a spectator/audience (Gillian Rose, 2023).

Arielle Aïsha Azoulay (2024) describes the difference between the aesthetic and the political nature of photography as photos taken for the purpose of art and/or the mimetic or photo-documentation of the world for a specific purpose. Politically, photographs have been used by many groups to promote, undermine, or change public narratives.

What images have you seen about Ghana?



Textile waste, beach, Accra, 2023



Elmina Slave Castle, Elmina, Ghana, 2023



Beach near Elmina Castle, Ghana, 2023

What political story do these images tell? Are they images of beautiful beaches, Colonial slave castles, or textile pollution caused by the Global North dumping the excesses of fast fashion?

During my research, Dr. William Gblerkpor talked about his work to shift the global understanding of Ghana through image from a narrative of pollution or poverty to highlighting the richness of Ghana's natural and cultural heritage by using hashtags that start with #ghana such as #Ghanaparksandmuseums and #ghanaarchaeology when posting online.



Facebook page screen shot, 2025

His goal is to flood the internet with a counter narrative to the deficit visual model of Ghana found in current media.

As you are now the audience of the photos you will encounter in this dissertation, I ask you to check in on your own assumptions about Africa and specifically Ghana. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie (2009) warns us about the danger of a single story in her TedTalk:

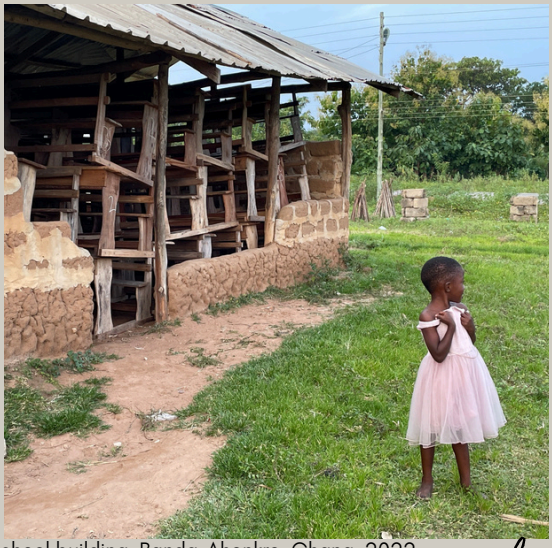
> "The consequence of the single story is this: It robs people of dignity. It makes our recognition of our equal humanity difficult. It emphasizes how we are different rather than how we are similar".

I invite you while reading my dissertation to understand my research as multiple stories from and about Ghana, Africa, and Canada.

I took this photo of an unused school building in Banda-Ahenkro during my first visit to Ghana in 2022. I took the photo for aesthetic purposes - I loved the lines and shapes of the desks playing with the light in the sky at dusk. I also thought about the metaphorical reading of the photo - the colonial school structure left to neglect and dust while we built something new.



School building, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022



School building, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022

While I was taking the photo, one of the little girls who lived in the house where I was staying wandered up in a pink dress. This little girl hated going to school in the morning and cried through the process of donning her uniform and getting her bookbag ready to head out the door. Like me, she was also turning away from the school building.

I also knew aesthetically, it would be a beautiful photo.

If I titled these photos *School in Ghana* or *School in Africa*, many audiences without experiences in Africa might immediately see a deficit or make an assumption about Ghanaian or African education.

If I had titled the same photo as School in Canada - what would you think?

Would you be searching for a date or a location in order to make sense of the photo. Is it a historic site? Is it in a particular community? The building is unfamiliar. But did you search for this additional information when the photo is identified as African or Ghanaian?



Methodist School, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022





Repurposed plane renovated into classroom space, Tamale, Ghana, 2023

These are all classrooms. The one in the middle is my classroom in Victoria, Canada.



Repurposed automotive shop class into grade 8 classroom, Victoria, BC, 2025

Students are learning in each of these spaces.

I invite you to park your preconceived notions about schools, classrooms, and Ghana and see the photos in conjunction with the text with an open mind and heart. Embark on the journey of learning from Ghanaians and African and Africanist archaeologists about what school could, should, or might be.

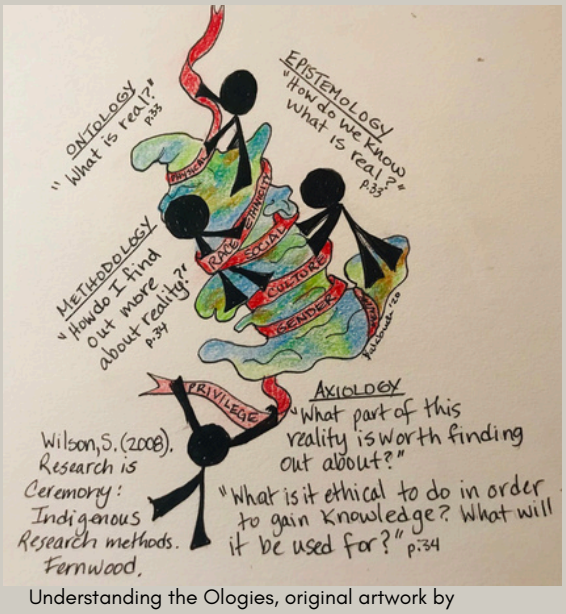
Like stories about Africa, there should be no single story of school.

Photo credits

Throughout the dissertation, any photos that have no caption with a photographer attribution are my own work. I have the consent of the human subjects to use these photos in my dissertation. The photos attributed to BTT with a catalogue number are from the digital repository Banda Through Time hosted by the University of Victoria - my original 'encyclopedia' about the Banda region of Ghana. You can visit the website and use the catalogue number to find the image and read more about its original context and its place in the greater narrative of Banda. Other photographers' works are credited and included with the permission.

Original Artwork

Along with photographs, I have included original artwork throughout this dissertation. I have found often throughout my life as a teacher and a learner that words do not always suffice to explain. I began drawing more polished educational images during the beginning of my doctoral studies. I was trying to understand the philosophies and intersecting ideas of academics, thinkers, and writers. These diagrams or drawings amused and apparently helped some of my fellow students and sometimes discomforted some of my professors who wanted responses in text form only.



Understanding the Ologies, original artwork by Allison Balabuch, 2020

"We draw not to transcribe ideas from our heads but to generate them in search of greater understanding" (Nick Sousanis, 2015, p.79).

Drawing complex ideas has helped me process this research at many levels. I hope it also helps you, as the reader, to better understand my thinking. Stephanie Posavec and Giorgia Lupi (2016) say it best: "To draw is to remember" (p.284-285). I draw to generate, understand, and remember but also to share the way my brain makes sense of the complexities of the world.

Digital Tools

I constructed this dissertation using *Canva*. The images used from Canva include simple graphics, shapes, and fonts. All Canva fonts and elements are from the Pro-licensing subscription.

> "Recognizing that education should be enjoyable rather than punitive, we sometimes attempt to alleviate boredom by making bits and pieces of education entertaining, instead of supporting those modes of activity to which the experience of boredom is irrelevant"
> (Mary Catherine Bateson, 1994, p.112-113).

The graphics, photographs, and original artwork in this dissertation are not entertainment or added on as an afterthought, they aim to make your experience of my doctoral journey as rich and exciting as it was for me to make.

Citations

> "Citations can be feminist bricks: they are the materials through which, from which, we create our dwellings"
> (Sara Ahmed, 2017, p.16).


Bricks at Red Clay Studio, Tamale, Ghana, 2023

I have chosen to include the first names of the writers, thinkers, and academics whose works I cite rather than APA throughout this dissertation so that you can read them as people and not as objects without gender or origin. Inspired by Sara Ahmed, I have tried whenever *possible* to privilege and cite the voices of women as well as African and Indigenous scholars to raise their voices. I use the word *possible* not as a synonym for in existence - my *possible* was only limited by my own breadth of knowledge at the moment I wrote this dissertation. My book shelf grows weekly but my *possible* has been limited by literal time. Academia and Western educational systems across the globe have been complicit in the "epistemic process of privileging some knowledge as more valid for development" (Vincent Adzahlie-Mensah & Máiréad Dunne, 2019, p.48). This is apparent through curriculum, language, and an overvaluation of European or Western knowledge systems - this dissertation is positioned to challenge this tradition.

A road map for the reader

Research Process



Welcome to my research journey. Chapter two will take you on the journey through my research process. Relational onto-epistemology grounds this work challenging the western view of knowledge as fixed or singular. Using a vine metaphor, I explore why context matters when understanding knowledge.

This understanding of knowledge as interconnected and inclusive of the more than human is an important base for understanding why the colonial image of school needs to be challenged if we want to work towards decolonizing education.

This relationality of knowledge required a research approach that allowed for new understandings to emerge as rhizomatic learning events that are entangled with post-structural, Indigenous, and feminist theory and literature. Chapter two describes this research process including how I dealt with the notion of data in a post-qualitative study.

Of the many encounters I had during my research, I have highlighted those that glowed - the encounters that resonated with my goals to decolonize education and that inform my understanding of what education might be when we dismantle current colonial structures.

From these encounters, I have drawn out four story vines that use a material object as both metaphor and more than human participant to share what would be found in the findings, analysis, and discussion sections of a dissertation. I have presented these as story vines as they are entangled and rhizomatic learning events that emerged from multiple encounters across my research. They are not the only possible story vines but they are the ones that glowed - they spoke to me as both a researcher and an educator.





Glass beads by Mr. Cedi, Ghana, 2023

Does where we teach matter?

In Chapter three, the first story vine uses glass beads as metaphor and participant to discuss educational spaces. The story vine draws from encounters across Ghana and Canada with educational spaces such as museums, schools, and communities. The tradition of reusing and transforming glass into new beads provides a frame for rethinking what we consider an ideal educational space - is a new, linear, and organized colonial-style building superior to reclaimed or transformed spaces or learning on the land? Is there actually an ideal or do we need to pay attention to local context and available resources?

Does how we teach matter?

In Chapter four, the second story vine uses weaving as a metaphor and participant to discuss the inclusion of Indigenous and Local Knowledge systems in schools. Interweaving the warp and weft of experiential and embodied learning, relationality, and connection to land, this story vine challenges colonial disciplinarity and time tables offering alternatives grounded in Indigenous models of learning and slow pedagogy.





detail of woven mat found in the Cultural Centre at Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022



Pottery examples, Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, 2023

Does what we teach matter?

In Chapter five, the third story vine uses potting as a metaphor and participant to move from the focus on pedagogy in Chapter 4 to the content included in educational settings such as schools and museums. The clay used to form this story vine highlights the importance of intergenerational and local knowledge in schools and museums as well as the impact this can have for both women's work and environmental sustainability.

Whose voices matter?

In Chapter six, the final story vine uses fish traps as metaphor and participant to discuss the importance of voice in the educational resources used globally. Casting a net that only values European or Western knowledge only catches a limited understanding of the world - past and present. This story vine explores the importance of working together across disciplines as well as including local knowledge keepers and youth voices in school resources. This story vine also examines current resources available to educators globally about Africa that portray only a colonial or deficit model of the continent.



Fish trap woven by Maxwell Gbadago, Dzobo Reuben, and Dzobo Sebastien, Cultural Centre, Banda-Ahenkro, 2022

Learnings, implications, and reflections

Chapter seven is a rhizomatic assemblage of the story vines, my memoirs, and the theory interwoven with the goal of sharing the deeper understandings that emerged throughout my research. Chapter seven is a call for the dismantling of colonial education systems, the valuation of local and Indigenous ways of teaching and learning, and an invitation to embark on more authentic collaborations between researchers, writers, and educators across disciplines to create educational resources and a richer, more diverse educational experience for students across the globe.

Chapter Two: Research Process



Shai Hills, Ghana, 2023

Public education

What can we learn from communities, schools, and museums in Ghana to decolonize education globally?

Before I ever encountered Ghana, over twenty-five years working in public education, across classrooms in Canada and the UK, have left me pondering a fundamental question that has guided my practice:

How do we improve public education?

This question arises from a constant pull between established norms that value theoretical understanding and my deep conviction that hands-on, applied learning resonates more deeply with students. These personal experiences have coincided with the rise and fall of educational "buzzwords" which often enjoy brief prominence before being replaced by the next innovation.

Inclusion

Growth Mindset

Universal Design for Learning

Land-based Learning

Project Based Learning

Indigenous Principles of Learning

Anti-racist education

Furthermore, while critical ongoing changes such as Truth and Reconciliation and Climate and Social Justice education demand sustained attention, their implementation can vary greatly, sometimes relegated to specific themed shirt days or months.

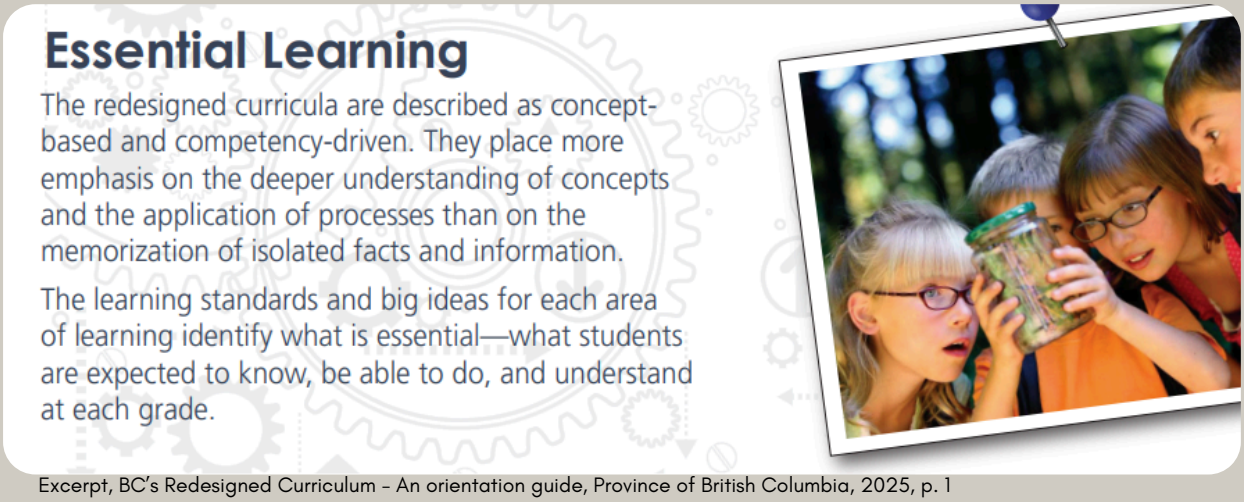


This tension between the practical and hands-on approach of some educators and the looming pressure of standardized testing, all in the service of preparing students for the nebulous *next level*, often feels like a significant barrier to meaningful change in public education.



Exam space, UVic 2025, Photo credit: Sharan Srinivasa Gopalan

It left me wondering, despite promising shifts like the 2010 curriculum redesign in British Columbia, Canada with its focus on *Aboriginal perspectives and knowledge*, *personalized learning*, *ecology and the Environment*, *addressing historical wrongs* and *making space for flexible learning environments* (BC's Redesigned Curriculum), why genuine transformation seems so elusive in many classrooms.



Essential Learning

The redesigned curricula are described as concept-based and competency-driven. They place more emphasis on the deeper understanding of concepts and the application of processes than on the memorization of isolated facts and information.

The learning standards and big ideas for each area of learning identify what is essential—what students are expected to know, be able to do, and understand at each grade.

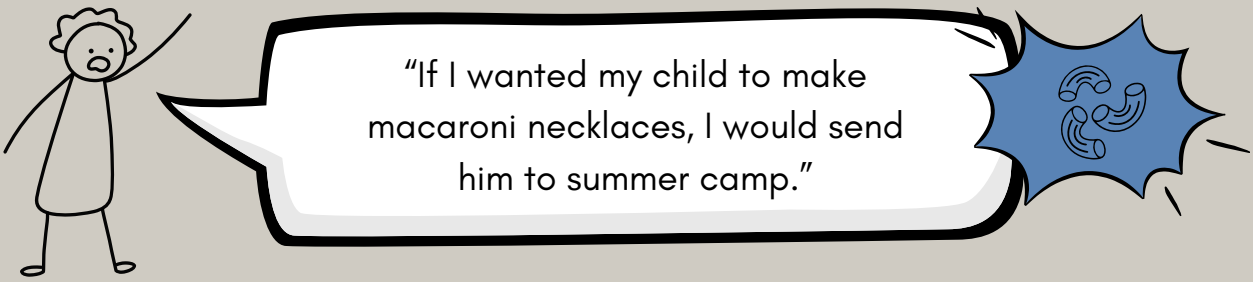
Excerpt, BC's Redesigned Curriculum - An orientation guide, Province of British Columbia, 2025, p. 1

While the curriculum emphasized deeper conceptual understanding and the application of skills over rote memorization, my experience over the last 15 years suggests that these inspiring underlying messages often failed to take root in the majority of classrooms. This disconnect between the articulated vision and the on-the-ground reality leaves me wondering why the potential rejuvenation I felt about this curriculum seemed to be shared by so few of my colleagues.

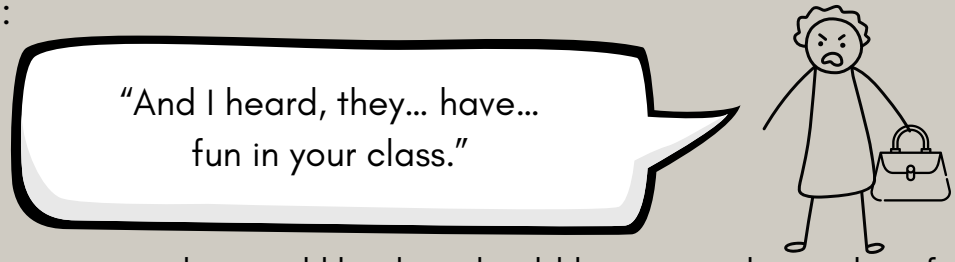
I heard they even have fun in your classroom...

During a parent meeting a few years ago, a grade 8 student's mother was expressing concerns about my interdisciplinary approach to math education that included Project-Based Learning, hands-on, and real-life applications.

When I would not give in and promise more math tests, she stood up in preparation to storm out of the room and proclaimed:



As she reached the doorway, she stopped to ensure she had the last word. Fists balled around the straps of her handbag, eyes flashing with anger, she proclaimed:

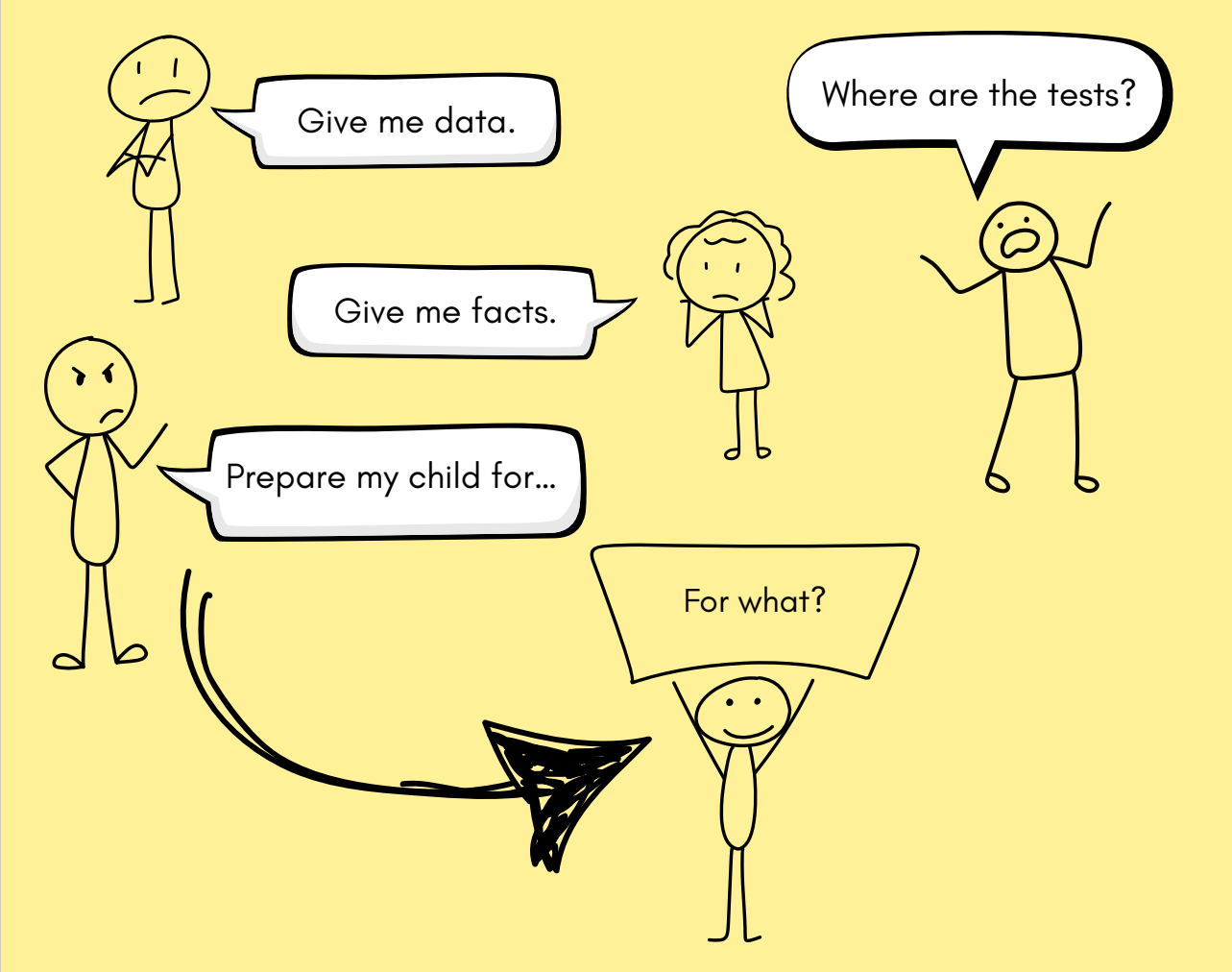


These last parting words sound like they should be a compliment but, from her perspective, it was not. To this day, this has been the most memorable encounter for me that set me on a new path.

The encounter did not cause me to question the validity of the approach I was trying to develop alongside the newly released curriculum. Instead, it set me to thinking about how to explain the teaching and learning that was happening in my classroom. Why did this parent have these concerns? What was different about my philosophical approach to teaching and learning that didn't fit for her?

I began to search for the words, the concepts, and the 'valid' examples from educational research that could both explain and back what felt more like instinct.

The feeling that what I was doing was *right* is a hard sell to concerned parents who have grown up in the colonial school system.



For many people the *what* in formal schooling is the goal of a productive adult occupation and it doesn't include time spent on teaching approaches such as arts-based approaches to learning.

Formal schooling as a dominant method of teaching children is a relatively new development. This model, which emphasizes quiet listening and absorbing information from various classroom materials, views knowledge as something to be acquired and stored. This particular approach gained prominence in the 19th-century industrializing North and spread globally during the 20th century through colonial networks, ultimately establishing it as the prevalent form of education today (Yovita N. Gwekwerere & Overson Shumba, 2021).

But is it what we should be doing?

Encounters

Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre describes moments such as my meeting with this parent as an encounter:

"One begins post-qualitative research with a concrete encounter with the real, not with a research question" (2019, p.11).

I began my doctoral journey after a multitude of encounters with parents, colleagues and students who wondered about my approaches. I did not realize until later that I started my research journey by asking the wrong questions:

How and what should I be teaching?

It was through post-structuralism that I realized that I had been asking the wrong question. I had been writing my research questions under the main concept of "*What **should** education look like*" yet, in practice, I was always asking myself "*What **might** education look like*". As I would get a new idea of how to approach learning in my classroom, I knew it was a good one if it felt both risky and exciting. What possibilities were there to grow, change, and try something new that was not in the canon of Western educational resources? I would wonder...

What if...

What if instead of a theoretical market, we created a real market for students to buy and sell products? What if we minted the coins? What if we created a garden? What if we raised chickens outside my classroom door? What if I taught 75 students to quilt?






By asking "what if?", I wasn't looking for confirmation of my ideas or my approaches, I was open to seeing what would happen.

Transcendence vs. immanence



Deleuze and fellow post-structuralists are interested in moving past the enlightenment view of transcendent knowledge and instead looking for immanence. They were moving away from centuries of philosophers who had been asking *How should one live*? And instead they asked *How might one live*?

I realized that I did not actually need an answer to *How should I teach*? The answer to any question that includes "should" denotes that there is a correct answer that comes from elsewhere - god, religion, tradition, the government, the textbook companies...

Colonial school systems are built on what *should be* - how *should* education be structured that is the same across global contexts.



This is transcendence.

What I am always seeking to understand is *How might I teach*?

- What are the possibilities?
- What can be created?
- What connections can we make?
- How can we learn with community?
- How can education promote social and climate justice?
- What can help young people live a happy, healthy life full of joy and opportunities?



This is immanence.

Giles Deleuze encourages us to break free from judging against preconceived standards and instead live our lives to our greatest potential.

My research seeks to explore the immanence of education: how we might envision an education system that will provide the teaching, the knowledge and the skills that will facilitate students living to their greatest potential. Ghana, like many countries that have inherited a school system through colonialism, offers the potential for learning from community, schools, and museums.

Vines: a relational onto-epistemology

During my research journey, I spent time at the Museum of Natural & Cultural Heritage, located in the Shai Hills Nature Reserve in Ghana. Beautiful vines wind around the trees at Shai Hills, some sprout from the ground, and others grow downward like tentacles from the sides of the rock faces near the caves. They create a dense interconnective web of plant life throughout the park.



Shai Hills, Ghana, 2023

The museum and nature reserve sit on the traditional territory of the Dangme Shai people.

The Shai Hills are a cultural keystone place and remain an important yearly site of pilgrimage for the Dangme Shai people. The Dangme Shai people have always valued a close relationship with their land.

In the 1800s, the British Colonial government expelled and relocated the Dangme Shai people from these traditional territories (James Anquandah, 1982).

The Dangme Shai people are well known for their pottery and plant knowledge as well as their understanding of ethnomedicine (James Anquandah, 2013; Alex Asase, George A. Akwetey, & Daniel G. Achel, 2010).



William Gblerkpor, Shai Hills, 2023

During one walk through the bush, Dr. William Gblerkpor, an archaeologist and member of the Dangme community, explained to me that:

"All the climbing plants are medicinal plants. So you don't cut them. If you see people doing it here, it is because they don't know. Everything climbing is medicinal. It is well known knowledge in Indigenous society."

On the subject of these same vines, some of the park staff at Shai had a different opinion.

On a walk with one of the park managers, he pointed out the team of men who were diligently trimming vines throughout the reserve.

"The vines are choking the trees, blocking the walkways, and threatening to reach out into the road."



Shai Hills, Ghana, 2023

He was proud of the quick and efficient work his staff were doing. In his opinion, vines *should* not be blocking the paths.

On the subject of vines, some of the park staff at Mole had a different opinion.

Later that same month, I encountered more vines in Mole National Park in the north of Ghana. One of the safari guides explained that vines provide a key food source for elephants to bridge between the wet and dry seasons.



Mole National Park, Ghana, 2023

When water and greenery is scarce, elephants can always find hydration and key nutrients in the vines that cover the land.

Are all vines medicine?

Or do vines weaken their hosts and block the paths?

Vines good?

Vines bad?

The answers to these questions come down to the context and what we believe is true. There is not one answer. What do we believe is real? In the Euro-western philosophical world, these are questions of ontology and epistemology.

Ontology

Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon (2017) describes ontology as theories of being:

Our ontologies are "the narratives we develop which give meaning to our experiences of 'life'" (p.33).

These narratives, experiences, and theories are built from birth and they provide ways for us to make sense of our world. The Euro-western lens that I was raised with in Canada could easily understand the park rangers cutting the vines to clear paths and roadways in Shai. From a human-centred point of view, the vines were blocking important access for human activities such as driving and walking tours in the park. From a post-human perspective, they are key to elephant health.



Shai Hills, Ghana, 2023

Had I visited Shai in my 20s, I would not have questioned the cutting of vines at all; however, our ontologies grow and change over time as we grow from new experiences.



Cattail hat weaving, Victoria, Canada

In my 40s, I became curious about indigenous plants and their traditional uses. Moving beyond the Latin names and scientific categories, I wanted to know what plants could be used for. I read. I took courses on weekends. I learned to weave baskets and hats, make jellies and dye textiles. This has been a process of being open to what might be learned but also a quest to find engaging ways to share these teachings with my students.

Even though I was learning more about Indigenous ways of knowing plants, I was still looking through a humanist lens. What use could the plants be to myself and my students? The lessons from Mole National park helped me better understand a post-humanist view.

William had shared that vines should not be cut because they are all human medicines but our safari guide in Mole was concerned about the elephants and their rights to have nutrition in every season. My ontological stance has come to be that knowledge comes from multiple realities, and is subjective, and co-created and ever changing.

Epistemology

Epistemology is concerned with ways of knowing. What sources of information do we value? Who do we listen to? What should we be learning? Local Traditional Knowledge or Indigenous Knowledge is often discounted in colonial or Euro-western research and education.

The orange honeysuckle is a vine that is indigenous to my current home, Vancouver Island, Canada. It winds its way around its hosts providing sweet nectar for hummingbirds and humans alike. The flexible stems have been used for generations for weaving and making rope.



Honeysuckle vine, Campbell River, Canada, photo by Sally Balabuch



Terry Howes

The Black twinberry, also a member of the honeysuckle family, produces dark berries used by the Kwakwaka'wakw people to make a black pigment. There is a traditional taboo against eating them; they believe that the berries will cause the consumer to lose the ability to speak (Jim Pojar & Andy MacKinnon, 1994, p.69).

Taboos are also a form of traditional knowledge in Ghana. William Gblerkpor explained to me that through understanding the taboos, you can better understand how to live in relation with the land. Living in relation with the land is a different way of being than to protect the land for your own future human use. Throughout this research, I learned from encounters with people but also from the land, taboos and stories, art, and my own embodied engagement in material practices such as weaving. I hold all these knowledges as equal.

The colonial image of education



Ivy climbing tree, University of Victoria, Canada

Vines like English ivy and the Himalayan blackberry also grow on Vancouver Island. They engulf natural and human made structures with efficacy and style.



If you have ever tried to remove either of these colonial vines from your home or the land in Canada, you will find deep roots and tenacious tentacles.

The ivy and the blackberry, like the school system, came to North America with the destructive forces of colonialism (Katheryne T. Leigh & Matthew D. Davis, 2017).



Ivy regrowing 6 months after removal, University of Victoria, Canada

The impact of colonialism is difficult to uproot

Traditional educational institutions, like schools and museums across the globe, continue to exist as structures that shelter and conserve what is held to be the pinnacle of western achievement (Russell Staiff, Robyn Bushell & Peter Kennedy, 2002). Even terms like 'ivy league' hold up this concept of western superiority.



Sandringham School No. 722, Dauphin, Manitoba, built in 1892

Yet, Michele Trouillot (2015) explains that this concept of the West was only created in the 16th century with the birth of exploration, colonization and a redefinition of the world through the eyes of the newly conceived 'Europe'.

In educational systems, this concept of *the West* is translated to the overvaluation of math and science over the arts and a privileging of the written word. Universities place an emphasis on these domains and this has had a trickle down effect into K-12 education. Michael E Van Valkenburg (1990) describes calculus, chemistry and physics as gatekeepers to university entrance across the globe, continuing to act as 'weeding' courses at the beginning of many degrees.

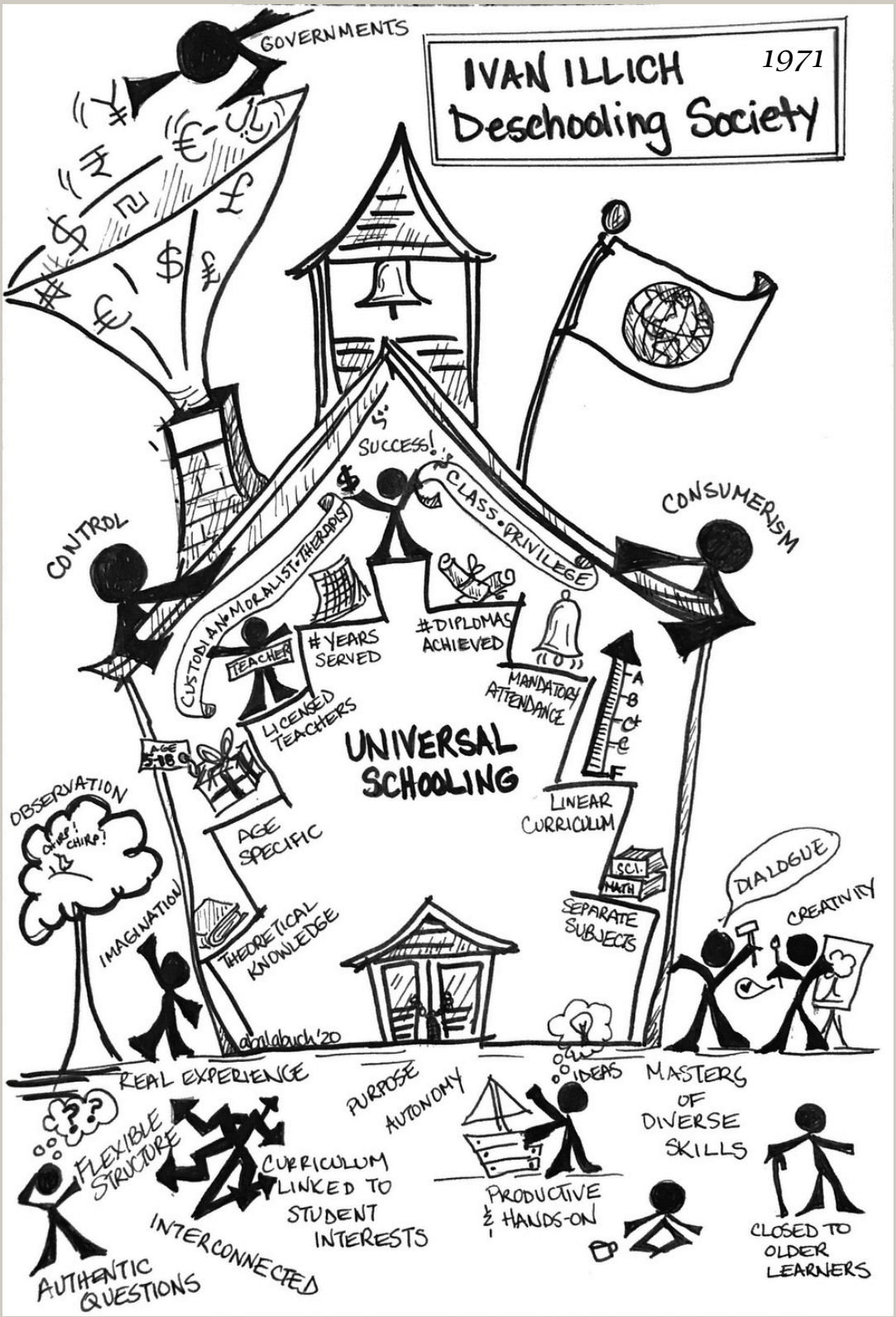


These are places to cut back the local vines that threaten the system leaving only English Ivy and manicured lawns to maintain. There is only one answer or one truth.


Inside Sandringham school house, Fort Dauphin Museum, Dauphin, Manitoba, 2015

The vines are not medicine when they are blocking the path.

Ivan Illich (1971) problematized the colonial image of school in his work *Deschooling society*.



Original Artwork by Allison Balabuch, Book summary, 2020

He outlines how the institution of school, driven by consumerism and control, excludes real experiences, connections to community and elders, and fragments learning.

Relationality

Vines are also often only categorized and subsequently legitimized under their *Latin* names.



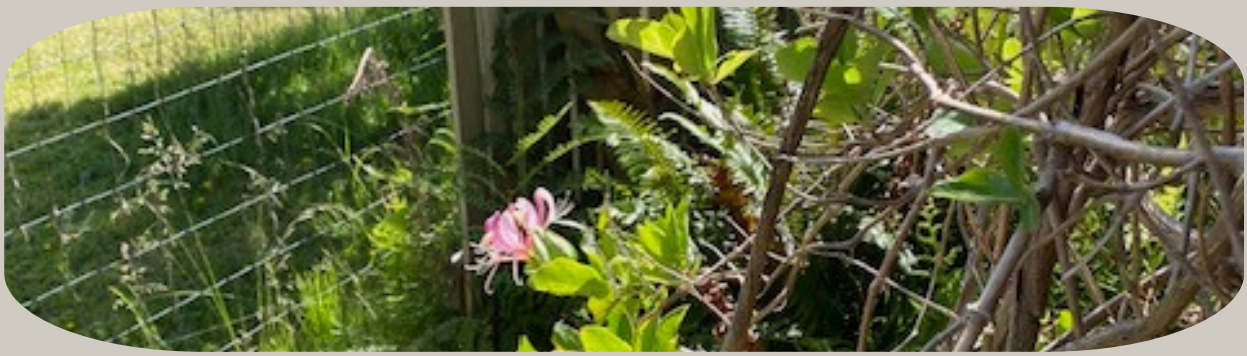
Rijksmuseum, CC0, via Wikimedia Commons

The honeysuckle genus *Lonicera* was named after a German naturalist, Adam Lonitzer, in the 16th century even though it has grown on the land in what is now known as Canada long before any Europeans arrived.

The Nlaka'pamux people from along the banks of the Fraser River call this plant sts'úm'mns e p'á sk'eʔ - Hummingbird sucking substance or q' ətsʼq' ətsʼ-usnín'us cf. q'ətsʼ - weaving.



The Halkomelem speaking people from the east coast of Vancouver Island and the south coast of mainland British Columbia call it q'ít'as tə spəlpəlqw ít'thtsəʔ - swing of a little owl



Which name contains knowledge?

That depends...

Do we want to classify the plant in a science text or do we want to know its place in the interconnected web that forms the land? Maybe it is both.

During my first trip to Ghana in 2022, we were documenting traditional fish trap making in the Banda region. Maxwell, one of the Ewe fishermen showed us a vine that they use to make rope.



Maxwell Gbadago (left) and Dzobo Reuben (right) harvesting rope vines for fish trap making, 2022

We asked him what the vine was called.



He answered that it is the vine that makes rope.

For most fishermen, there was no need for a Latin name when the relationship between the people and the vine is rope-making, however, for academic metadata purposes, that relational knowledge was not enough. Ironically, Maxwell is also the only person Ann Stahl met in Ghana who was interested in the Latin names.

If I value the memorization of Latin names in Science, I will teach and learn differently than if I value the Indigenous knowledge of vine use in weaving, medicine, and fishing. What if I value both?



or...and?

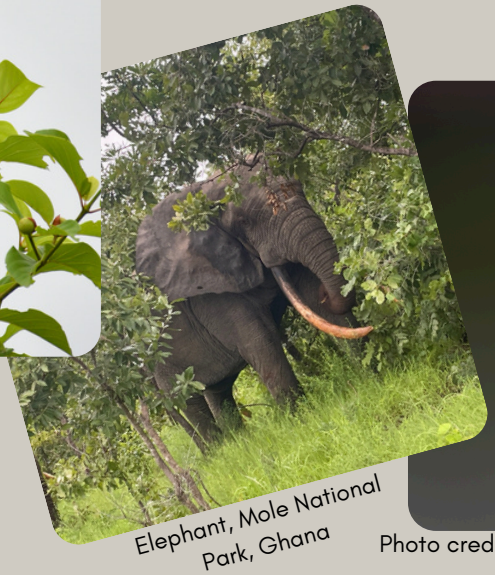


Cattail weaving, Victoria, Canada

If I value building an understanding of the interconnection of all things in our world and the importance of the land, the animals, and the plants as equal and inextricably linked with humans, the learning would be different.



Northern Red Bishop, photo credit: W. Gblerkpor, Ghana



Elephant, Mole National Park, Ghana



Photo credit: W. Gblerkpor, Ghana

The answer to these questions depends on **why** I am teaching about vines and **why** learners will care. The reality or the context will change the answer.

Reality is Relational

Bagele Chilisa, T. E. Major, & K Khudu-Petersen, (2017) describes reality as:

"ways of understanding the nature of existence and the many relationships that make up the web of connections that sum up existence" (p.820).

Like the land, everything is connected and each part of our reality is in relation with all the other parts. The rocks give way over time to the water that will cut dramatic canyons and bring nutrients to the living beings along its path.

Humans remove, destroy, plant, and build connections with the environments in which we live depending on our belief systems. Do we see the non-human as a resource or part of our relations?

We also add, remove, and make sense of information through our belief systems and our experiences.



Fish trap woven in Akanyakrom at the Cultural Centre in Banda-Ahenkro, 2022

Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon (2017) describes these relational onto-epistemologies using the metaphor of a fishing net. Our nets are woven with a warp of ontology and a weft of epistemology. These are constantly being cast in the wide ocean of pure experience. We will catch only some of what we value and we will always fail to catch everything.

She says, "I embrace the possibility of multiple descriptions of the world, some better than others, but all of our descriptions are limiting and unable to catch up this world that flows on beyond our grasps. We are limited too" (p.29).

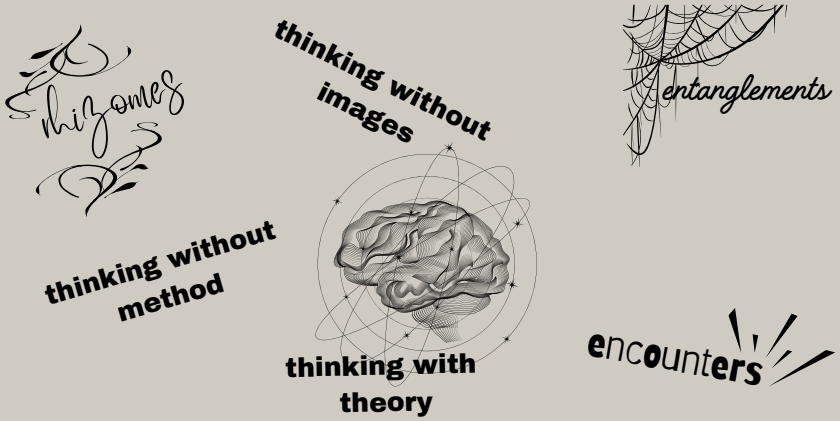
What is caught depends on the one who is fishing. Like Karen Barad's (2006) view of onto-epistemology, knowledge is always being produced and (re)produced in an interconnected view of the world.

Post-qualitative research

If everything is relational and dependent on context and worldviews, how do you conduct a research study about what education could look like? How do these questions connect to what we can learn from communities, schools, and museums in Ghana to decolonize education globally?

Post-qualitative research has grown out of the disconnect that many researchers were feeling about the problematic, humanist view of qualitative research and from the 'posts' - post-structuralism, post-modernism, post-humanism (Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, 2021).

Researchers, thinkers, and writers such as Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (1997, 2019, 2021), Alecia Y. Jackson (2013, 2017), Lisa A. Mazzei (2013), Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon (2017), Karen Charman (2021), Maggie MacLure (2021), and Mary Dixon (2016) draw on post-structural concepts such as:



These thinkers draw on these concepts to not only explain their research approaches but also to deconstruct and suggest alternatives to inquiry other than those found in either quantitative or qualitative paradigms.

My research is a rhizomatic entanglement of encounters and learning events from my time working in Ghana as well as my time working with African and Africanist archaeologists and educators. Through following the rhizomes, I set out to understand:

What can we learn from communities, schools, and museums in Ghana to decolonize education globally?

Rhizomes

Thinking about the world and knowledge as interconnected and relational rhizomes rather than arboreal structures such as trees forms some of the theoretical framework for this research.

According to Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (1987), tree structures maintain a structural hierarchy. They are deeply rooted in place and grow branches and limbs that can be used to categorize and value different knowledge systems.

Barbara J. Thayer-Brown (2017c) uses the tree metaphor inspired by Deleuze and Guattari to compare an old tree to Western educational institutions that are deeply rooted in rigid, colonial practices and deeply committed to preserving "*the way things are*" as opposed to a rhizomatic structure that grows in all directions with no starting or ending points (p.69).



Cathedral Grove, Vancouver Island, Canada, 2018, photo credit: Sean Welby



A rhizome continually makes connections but is never closed, never ending and never completely analyzable. At multiple points, a rhizome can be broken or ruptured and it will create new offshoots that continue to be interconnected. When data is understood as rhizomatic, the researcher is not searching for one transcendent answer but instead the immanent possibilities and understandings.

When viewing vines in a rhizomatic model, they are medicine, shelter, nourishment, and both creative and destructive at the same time.

In education, rhizomatic thinking make space for endless possibilities.

The flattening of knowledge valuation makes space in educational research for teachers and traditional classrooms but also for local and Indigenous knowledge systems, community engagement, and hands-on learning.



Model Girls School, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022



Florence demonstrating potting, Ghana, 2023



Cedi demonstrating glass bead making, Ghana, 2023

Students learn in classrooms, in local knowledge keeper workshops, in nature, and in their homes. They learn from theory and from practice. They can create rhizomatic connections between learning spaces.



Students from Banda-Ahenkro sharing their weaving, Ghana, 2022

Assemblage and entanglement

The ‘data’ collected in post-qualitative research is better understood as an assemblage or an entanglement of encounters that are enmeshed in complex relationships. Grounded in Deleuze and Guattari’s rhizomes, Jesse Bazzul (2020) describes this research-as-assemblage as an effort to:

“relate, trace, and entangle different material parts, living entities, stories and discourses, ethics and politics, as well as different forces such as desire and collective action” (p.118).



Honeysuckle, Campbell River, Canada, 2025

The ruptures and the complexity of the rhizomatic structure means that

“any point of a rhizome can be connected to anything other, and must be”

(Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, 1987, p. 7)

Through the folding and flattening of these and other interconnected components, new understandings have agency to emerge in dynamic, unpredictable ways (Alecia Y. Jackson, Lisa A. Mazzei, 2013; Lisa A. Mazzei, 2013; Maggie MacLure, 2013).

New knowledges and understandings have the agency to make themselves known.

Thinking without image

A post-qualitative approach to educational research requires the letting go of the Eurocentric, western image of education held up in colonial institutions and systems. When I began my research, I was looking for ways to change education with the desired goal to make it more accessible, useful, and positive for students.

Even though change was my desired goal, I was holding onto a fixed image of formal education. We all have an image of what school looks like - the building, the seating, the texts, the purpose. This western or European model of school is what we conjure when we think about school and this image of school is globally pervasive.



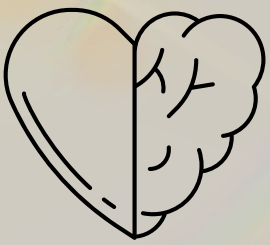
School building, Banda-Ahenkro, 2022

Instead of considering how the data in my research fit within the tree structure or image of K-12 education, I let go of this image and allowed myself to be open to the rhizomatic encounters that came across my path.

Rather than cut through the vines, I followed the vines that resonated or glowed.

Maggie MacLure (2013) describes the process of knowledge emerging from post-qualitative research as moments where the data glows.

> These are moments when the researcher not only understands that an encounter holds importance but also feels it.

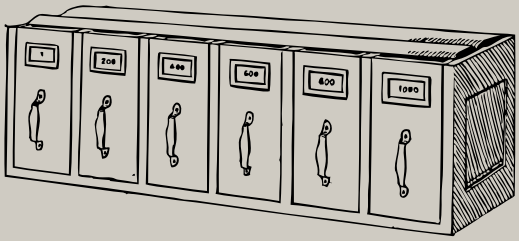


This understanding accords agency to the data as it "feels distributed and undecidable, as if we have chosen something that has chosen us".

(Maggie MacLure, 2013, p.661)

Refusing Method

Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre explains that post-structuralism itself refuses method and methodology.



> "Method will, in fact, shut down thought, capture it, consign it to the strata, to the norm, to what everyone knows".
>
> (Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, 2021, p.4)

I resonated with Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (2021), Mary Dixon (2016), and Alecia Y. Jackson (2017) when they each described how the available qualitative methods did not fit with the theories and concepts that form the ground in which my study was growing - in fact they felt limiting to the point of compromising what I wanted to learn.

Alecia Y. Jackson (2017) describes research without method as an openness - to start in the middle, to show up with a concept, and to be open to chance encounters.



Documenting raffia harvesting, Sabiye, Ghana, 2022



Cultural Centre, Banda-Ahenkro, 2022

I came from a formal school context but I wanted to learn from more than just educators working in the system.

I was open to hear the voices of local knowledge keepers, community members, archaeologists, and children.

I was open to learn from the land.

I was open to learn from nonformal educational spaces such as museums and community centres.

The event of learning



Mary Dixon describes learning as an event:

"The event of learning is produced in the chaos of knowledge, knowing, being, becoming, experiencing and living."

Mary Dixon, 2016, p.104)

These encounters and subsequent events of learning happen all the time - we just have to pay attention. They will allow for the creation of new knowledges and ideas and make space for multiple ways of knowing as the researcher pays attention to the glow and isn't restricted to a pre-planned schedule.

Alecia Y. Jackson (2017) encourages researchers to leave qualitative methods and instead to start in the middle, being receptive to these encounters. Significant encounters cannot be preplanned but instead occur by "force, by disturbance or by chance" (p.667).



Spontaneous tour of the textbook room, Model Girls School, Banda-Ahenkro, 2022

Deleuze's concept of *thinking without image* or, as Alecia Y. Jackson and Lisa A. Mazzei propose, to *think with theory* or to *think without methods*, makes space for unlimited encounters and learning events to emerge - we are not limited by expectations.



Banda-Ahenkro, 2022

Tamale, 2023

Akanyakrom, 2022

Mole, 2023

My research has come together through these encounters that created significant learning events for me.

I began to understand the rhizomatic nature of these learning events and encounters as I followed the glow of the story vines that were weaving in and out through my writing, reflection, art, and photography.

I listened and I learned.

Rather than traditional interviews, I recorded *performative accounts* with people who came into my path but I also spent time with them in cars and classrooms and on walks through the land. Alecia Y. Jackson and Lisa A. Mazzei (2021) ask us to reconsider interviews as performative accounts that are part of the ongoing narrative and constitute ever changing moments in time.


Shai Hills, 2023

I documented traditional practices such as bead making, weaving, and potting.


Shai Hills, 2023

I kept both written, artistic and photographic journals throughout my research.


Mole, 2023

I created educational resources along my research journey and shared them with teachers and students in Ghana and in Canada.


Banda-Ahenkro, 2022

I learned from the non-human world of objects, animals, and the land itself.

Through the recursive practice of (re)reading, (re)viewing, (re)writing, reflecting, and making, possible answers to my questions about how we might learn and teach emerged.

Research encounters

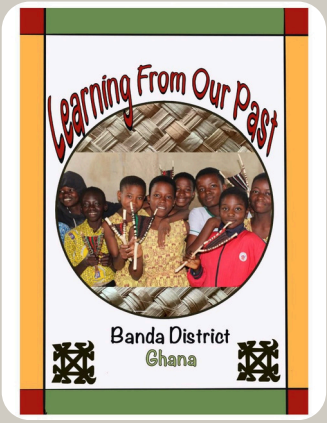
Encountering Archaeology, Dr. Ann Stahl, and Banda

My research began with an encounter with archaeologist Dr. Ann Stahl in January, 2021. After almost 40 years of research in the Banda region of Ghana, Ann was looking for an education graduate student who could help transform the archaeological research into a book for Junior High School or Middle School aged students (ages 11-14) and my supervisor Dr. Kathy Sanford thought of me because of my interest in teaching local and Indigenous knowledge in schools.

This project was funded by a Social Studies and Humanities Research of Canada (SSHRC) grant and coincided with an Endangered Material Knowledge Programme (EMKP) grant. (More detailed information in story vine chapters.)

The concept of the school resource came from the community in consultation with Ann oriented around the theme:

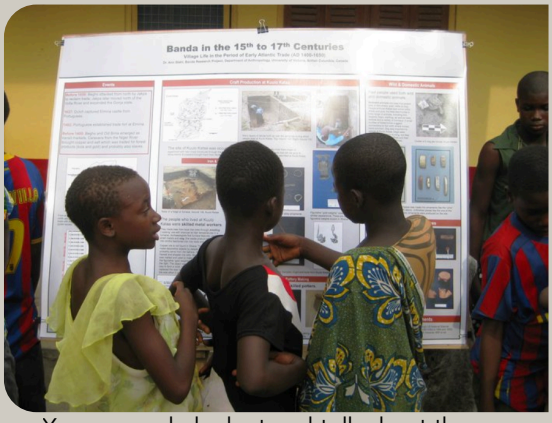
Our grandmothers and grandfathers were knowledgeable people.



Finished book cover, 2023

The community wanted a way to share their history with their young people.

The Banda project is an example of the archaeology of global connections. This approach pushed back against the colonial image of Africa as unchanging and underdeveloped. The fact-making narrative-making processes, described by Michele Trouillot (2015), took a direct historical approach through the exploration of successively earlier sites in a particular place. It focused on a rural setting and village life and how daily life such as food ways, crafting, and exchange was dynamically shaped by continental and intercontinental networks.



Young people look at and talk about the "Banda in the 15th to 17th Centuries" informational poster during a Banda Heritage community event. Banda Cultural Centre, Ahenkro, 15 July, 2011
BTT 17-17073

Learning from Ann about knowledge mobilization as well as valuation of local knowledge and practices resonated with my questions about how school might be a place that includes rather than discludes local and Indigenous knowledge systems that fall outside the colonial or Eurocentric model of education.

I became acquainted with the people of Banda from afar through the digital repository Banda Through Time hosted by the University of Victoria Libraries.

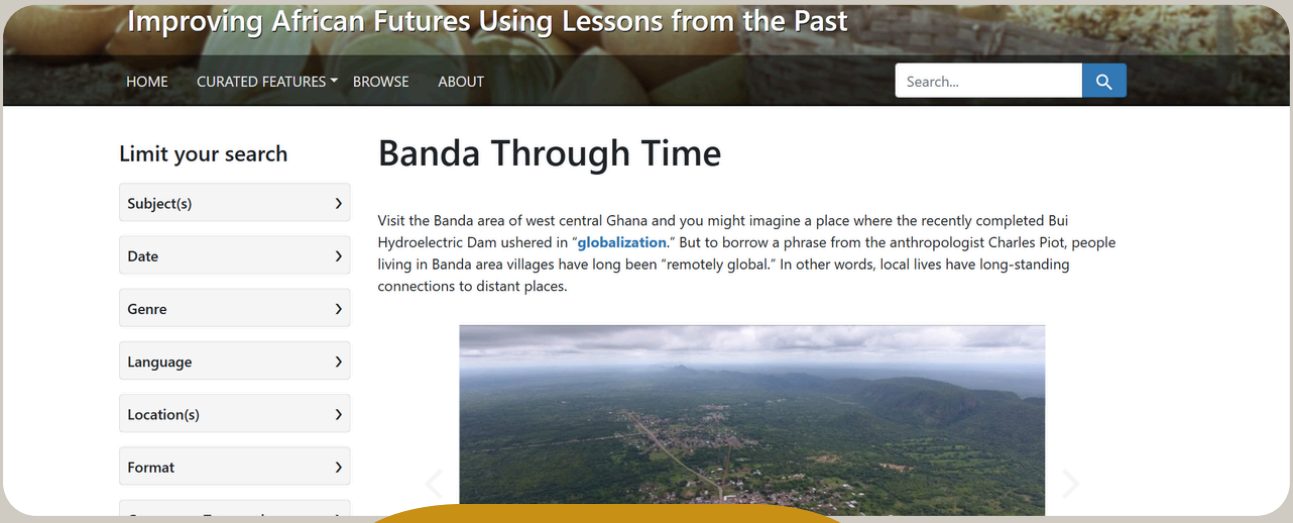


Banda Community Heritage Event, 2011, BTT 17-17068



Ann Stahl shares photos from Banda Project Archives with the Banda Queen Mother and her Elders, 2016, BTT 17-17075

I began this part of my doctoral research with no knowledge of Ghana - not the past, not the present. I read through the website and combed through the images and videos that had been assembled from the Banda Research Project, from 1986 through 2014, and the collaborative community-based Banda Heritage Initiative since 2016.



Project history timeline

All of these initiatives have worked to expand awareness of the area's rich history and diverse cultural heritage both in and out of Ghana.

Encountering Ghana - Part 1

In July 2022, I went with Ann to Ghana with a draft of the Banda school resource to consult with the community. During this trip, I had other encounters that added to my knowledge of the Banda region but also deepened my understanding of learning, research, and schooling. As a part of a Endangered Material Knowledge Programme grant from the British Museum, I participated in the documentation of both traditional fish trap making and mat weaving.



Fish trap weaving in Akanyakrom, 2022



Documenting mat weaving in Sabiye, 2022

I worked with local Junior High teachers and students to pilot my Banda school resource and experiment with hands-on learning through weaving. I also had the opportunity to consult and share the draft with community groups across the region. I met with parents, elders, and children in different villages and made additions and changes to the draft resource.



Consultation in the village of Dumpofie, 2022



Consultation with Henewaa, Banda-Ahenkro, 2022

I wasn't sure how all of these pieces fit into my own research as I did not have a qualitative methodology or series of methods that I had planned for data collection. Instead, I remained open to the encounters and learning events as they occurred and paid attention to the data that glowed.

During the writing of the resource draft, I shared the pages of the book draft with my Canadian students and tried weaving activities with my own middle school classes. When Jerry, my contact teacher in Banda, and I talked about what to do with his classes in Ghana, we decided on a similar weaving activity. I facilitated weaving workshops and shared the resource draft in four Junior High School classrooms at four different schools.



Model Girls School



African Faith Tabernacle School



Methodist School



Catholic School

I also facilitated a group discussion with four teachers and four students about the Banda school resource and the weaving activities with the four classes in attendance which became an event organized by Jerry Tsito to not only share teacher and student reflections but also to celebrate the weaving done by the four classes.



Student weaving projects



Final discussion and celebration event, Banda, 2022



Student weaving project

These connections and experiences with weaving in both Canada and Banda opened up the opportunity to not only help document mat weaving practices with Owusu Alexander in the village of Sabiye but to try weaving techniques with my own small mat. This allowed me to learn not only by listening but by doing.



Learning to weave, Sabiye, 2022

In Akanyakrom, I had many encounters under the mango trees. I encountered a different form of weaving in the form of traditional fish traps.



Resource consultation with community, 2022



Fish trap weaving, 2022

I not only encountered fish traps but also traditional plant harvesting, material preparation, and fish smoking.



Bamboo harvesting



Rope vine



Fish smoking

I encountered fishing as culture.



View of the exposed riverbed looking southeast from the Bridge near Bui dam, 2022.

In Ankanyakrom, I also encountered the hydroelectric dam in Bui and the impact of large scale energy projects on local fishing communities including the loss of homes, lands, and livelihoods.

Near the end of my first trip to Ghana, I had the opportunity to visit the Shai Nature Reserve and encountered Dr. William Gblerkpor who became a key informant in my research.



Allison Balabuch, William Gblerkpor, Ann Stahl, Zonke Guddah, Shai, 2022

William had been rebuilding the museum space for the past few years through community and family contributions of time, expertise, and money in a concept he describes as “museum as family home” (See Glass Beads chapter). His goal was to create an educational space for local community, university students, and youth.



Shai Hills, 2022

The encounter with William and Shai itself felt significant.

It glowed.

I knew I needed to return.

Encountering systemic racism about Africa in education

Throughout the early resource development and during my time in Ghana, Ann and I had many conversations about archaeology, Africa, and education. The systemic racism inherent in resources and texts outside of Africa reduces the entire continent to a list of deficits such as famine, disaster, war, and disease.



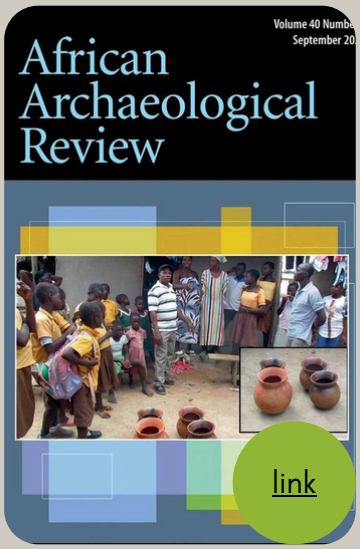
It is difficult to find resources about Africa that highlight the rich history and heritage found across the continent.

Photo of current event resources available in my photocopy room, September 2023

Archaeologists are learning and writing about the rich history of the multitude of diverse communities across the continent but that information was not finding its way to educators. The textbooks in the schools I had visited in Banda also featured stories set in England rather than including local authors and content.

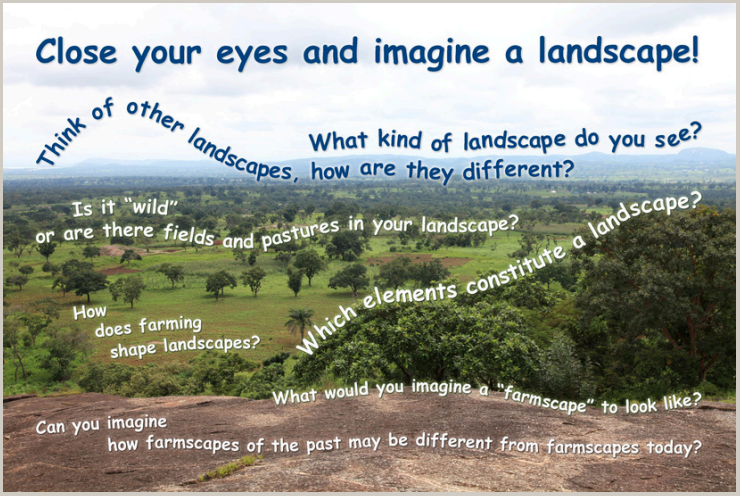


Textbook room, Model Girls school, Banda-Ahenkro, 2022



These discussions sparked the idea for a special edition of *African Archaeological Review* that Ann had been asked to edit. Reaching out to early-career and already established African and Africanist archaeologists as well as educators, Ann brought together a group of scholars who were interested in trying a different approach to knowledge mobilization in an academic journal. Together with Ann Stahl, Kathy Sanford and I met with the archaeologists to provide some insight into what themes and approaches would be interesting to educators globally.

I worked with all of the archaeologists contributing to the special edition as they wrote pieces that took up the challenge to write in more accessible ways for educators.



Graphic image included in the article: Earth, Water, Air, and Fire – Thinking about Farming and Farmscapes by Alexa Höhn, Emmanuel Mushayikwa & Alex Schoeman, 2023

Their articles took approaches such as Afrofuturist fiction, graphic representation, art, and storytelling with an aim to show how knowledge from the past can serve as a resource for confronting contemporary situations. (See Fish Traps chapter).

✦

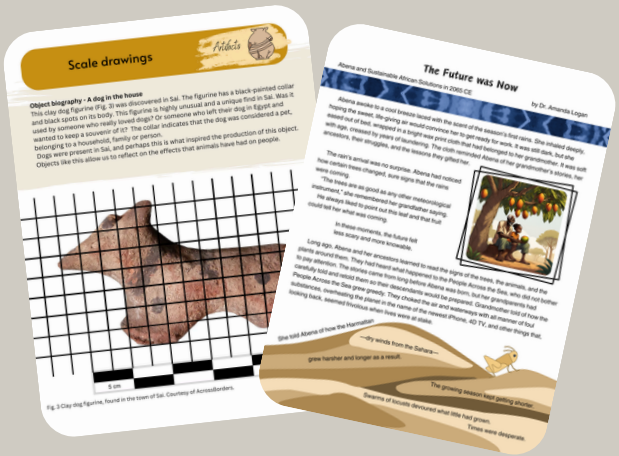
My connection with weaving was deepened through my own collaboration with Dr. Bako Rasoarifetra to write an article about the importance of teaching weaving in Madagascar, Canada, and Ghana (Allison Balabuch & Bako Rasoarifetra, 2023).



Weaving projects, Victoria, Canada, 2023

✦

During this project, I was able to flesh out some of the ideas that had been sparked about through my various encounters about educational models, the systemic colonial narratives of Africa, and the effects of the colonial system in both Ghana and Canada. I also developed some companion resources to the articles for direct use in the classroom.



Educational resources developed from the AAR special edition in consultation with archaeologists, 2023.

While I was working on the special edition, I also finished the school resource for Banda. The book was finally published in 2023 in both English and Nafaanra, one of the several local languages in Banda.

The school resource, Learning From Our Past, was printed at the University of Ghana press and 1000 copies made their way to schools in the Banda region as well as free access online through the University of Victoria.



Community at the December 2023 Book Launch, photo by Snyda Mensah.



In true Ghanaian style, the book was launched at a community event on December 8, 2023. Students were given the day off school to attend and the day was full of speeches, dancing, and celebration.



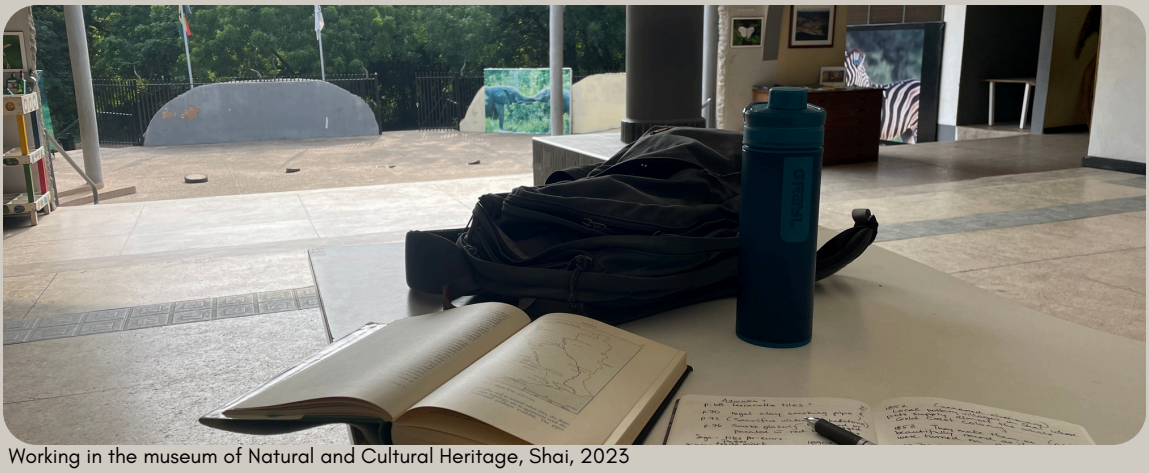
Students sharing their weaving at the December 2023 Book Launch, photo by Snyda Mensah.



Book delivery, University of Ghana press, 2023 photo by Snyda Mensah

Encountering Ghana - Part 2

Through all of these collaborations, my encounter with Shai tugged at my heart and I knew that I needed to return. In July, 2023, my wish became a reality and I returned to Ghana. With Dr. Ann Stahl and Dr. William Gblerkpor's kind assistance and support, I spent time at Shai Hills with park officials, national service workers, and the visiting public. William had expressed an interest in a similar educational resource for Shai as I had created for Banda.



Working in the museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage, Shai, 2023

With this goal in mind, he arranged for me to document pottery practices with local potter Djangmuh Florence Kumuki (Florence) as well as traditional glass bead making with Nomoda Ebenezer Djaba (better known as Cedi).



Cede, traditional bead maker, 2023



Florence, traditional potter, 2023

I recorded a tour of the museum site and surrounding green spaces at Shai with William to better understand his goals and vision for the site. I spent a week working from the museum, investigating the library, and meeting teachers and school groups that came through the site. On this second trip to Ghana, I continued to approach my research with a mind open to learning from who and what I encountered.

My introduction to Ali, the Park Manager at Mole National Park, sparked a weeklong trip to the nature reserve in the north of Ghana. I was warmly welcomed by the park. I met with community members, park workers, and went on safari to learn from the guides, the land, and the animals.



Ali Mahama, Allison Balabuch, and Bona Kiyiire at Mole National Park, 2023



Canoe tour, xxx village, 2023



Museum space, Mole National Park, 2023

The educational manager at Mole, Bona Kiyiire, and I worked on ideas to deepen their programming and educational displays in the museum on-site.

During this trip to the north of the country, I also had an encounter with Red Clay Studios in Tamale that sparked new thinking about physical educational spaces.



Train being renovated into classroom spaces, Red Clay Studios, Tamale, 2023,



Greenhouse learning space under construction, Red Clay Studios, Tamale, 2023

These encounters with people, places, and objects form the learning events of my research. Often the significance of a learning did not emerge until a new encounter resonated or glowed in connection with a previous learning event.



Sharing Canadian student weaving projects with students at the Model Girls' school, Banda-Ahenkro, Teacher Jerry Tsito and Patrick Mensah documenting in background, Ghana, 2022, photo credit: Zonke Guddah

I approached my research being open to understand that there were many different answers to the question:

What can we learn from communities, schools, and museums in Ghana to decolonize education globally?

My research has been a research-by-assemblage. These assemblages of vines or rhizomes are not binary nor are they hierarchical.

Instead of cutting the vines that seemed irrelevant or seemed positioned to block my path, I followed them instead. I have made space for vines to be neither good nor bad, but simply what they are in their particular context. I let go of the colonial images I held of education and made space to learn.

My hope is that this research can open up new ways of thinking about education for me and others. It seeks to disrupt colonial and patriarchal entrenched narratives and invite educators at all levels to see the possibilities of a new way forward with youth across the globe.



original artwork, ABalabuch, 2026

Dealing with Data

What is data?

"Post qualitative inquiry doesn't have pre-existing methods of data analysis like coding data or thematic analysis in which themes somehow miraculously emerge from the data"
(St. Pierre, 2019, p.6).

I began my doctoral journey intending to conduct a qualitative study and document my learning through research journals but my experienced reality was significantly different. It was not until I did a deep dive into post-structuralism that I began to question not only the idea of what constitutes 'data' but also how to make sense of the 'data' that I had 'collected'. If there are no pre-existing methods of analysis, where do I start?

Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (1997) expressed it well when she said that "even though I will continue to use the word data, its meaning has forever shifted for me and will continue to shift as I prod and poke at this foundational signifier on which knowledge rests. I will, in the future, undoubtedly write sentences using data that may not be too clear" (p. 185).

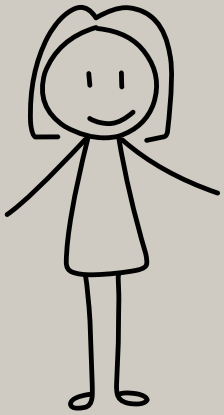


Svend Brinkmann (2019) proposes the term creata instead of data - what is "taken, constructed, and selected rather than the given" (p.721).

Like Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, I have chosen to use the word *data* for what I had experienced and learned throughout my research journey even though it is more *creata* in spirit. My choice to use the word data is to more clearly communicate with researchers and readers who are familiar with the term data across quantitative and qualitative research studies; however, like Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, I continue to question its meaning in post-qualitative research contexts.

Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre (1997) describes two of the issues with qualitative and quantitative data collection as both the overvaluation of words and the linearity of the qualitative process. Data collected in these theoretical frameworks is reduced to text that is extracted, coded, and then translated into more text to explain findings. As my research is grounded in decolonizing educational systems, attempting to work with data using this colonial image presented a philosophical contradiction for me as a researcher.

The photographs, hands-on experiences, and art that I collected and created throughout the process could not be reduced to words alone.





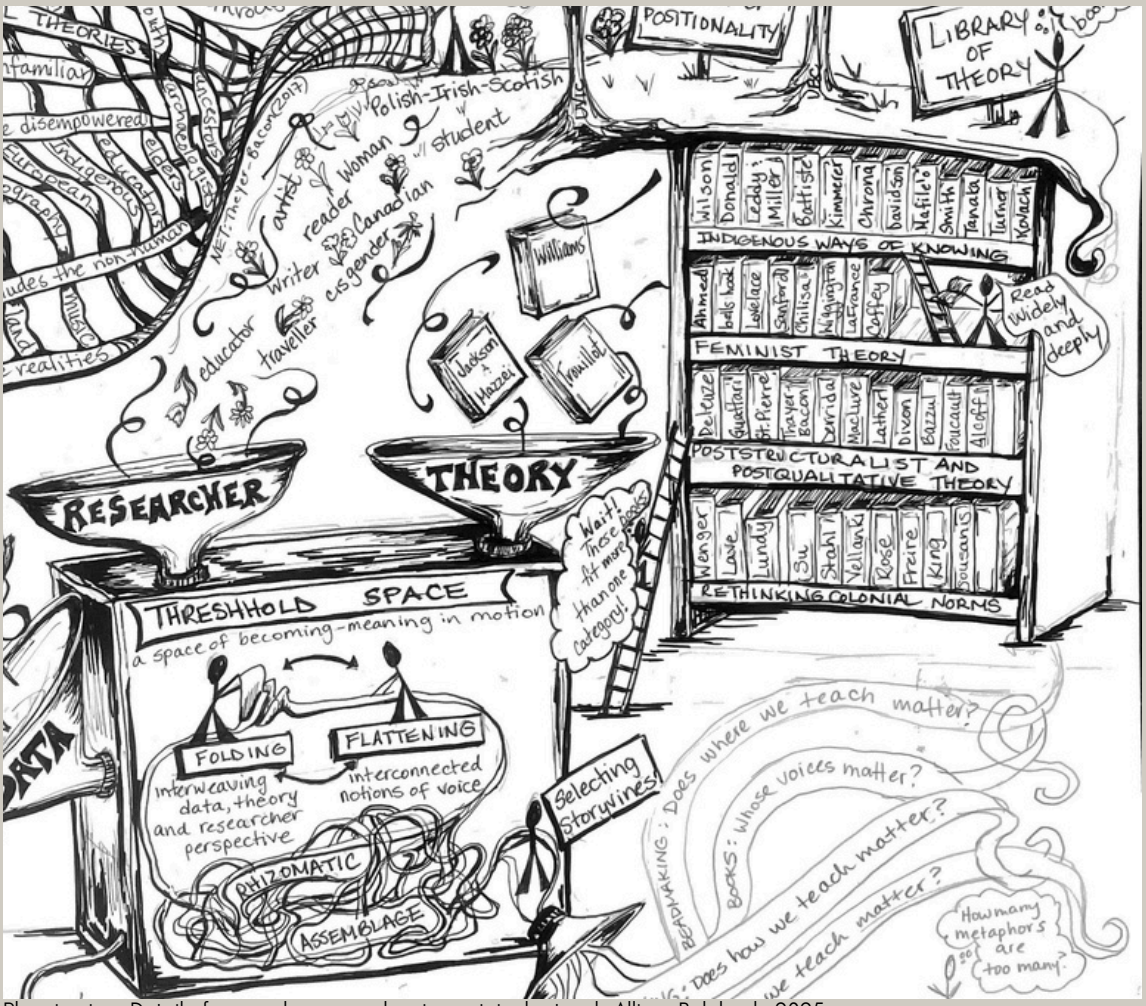
Me learning to mat weave from Owasu Alexander, Sabiye, 2022

The notion that a researcher can collect data and then progress in one linear path through analysis and interpretation also did not resonate with my own process.

Because my journey began with an encounter with Ann Stahl and the people of Banda that predated my research proposal or formalized research questions, my research was messy from the start.

Plugging in

Starting with postcolonial and feminist theory as well as Indigenous ways of learning, I was also guided by theories of education that include land-based, project-based and hands-on learning. Interdisciplinarity was also key in my thinking about education including the valuation of the arts as an equal to what is considered academic in colonial schooling. When trying to make sense of this in a qualitative study, this felt like 'too much' theory; however, when looking through a post-qualitative lens it begins to make more sense.



Plugging in – Detail of research process drawing, original artwork, Allison Balabuch, 2025

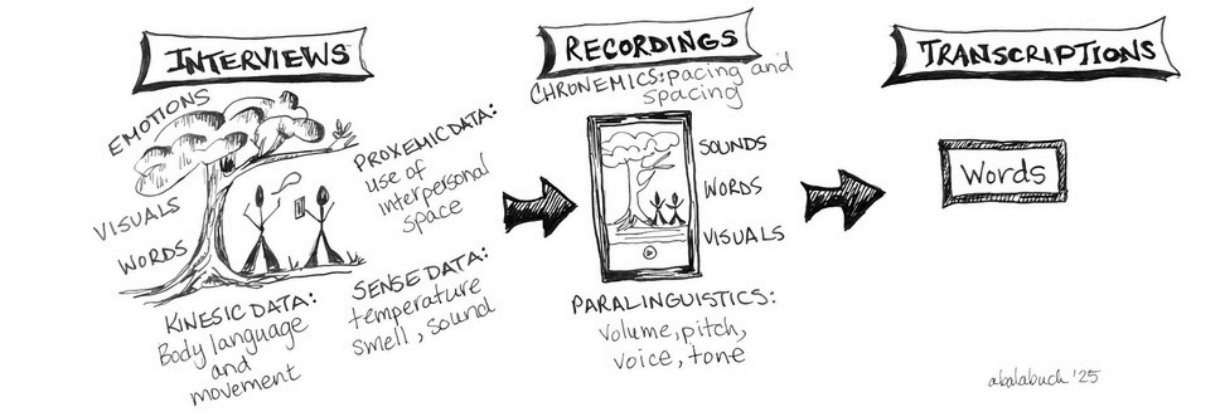
Alicia Youngblood Jackson and Lisa A Mazzei (2013) describe how to view the research process as "plugging in" inspired by Deleuze and Guattari. *Plugging in* is a way to see your data through the lens of many different theories. Each theory is like a tool in a toolbox and helps to open up to new understandings and help the researcher to shift from a mindset of searching for answers to asking new questions. The plugging in - the folding and flattening- is the process of interweaving the data, the theories, and the researcher perspective (Alecia Y. Jackson & Lisa A. Mazzei, 2013).

The messiness of transcriptions

Transcription "decisions are influenced by our epistemological intent, which defines what knowledge is constructed and how knowledge is formed" (Lilian Cibils, 2019).

The problem of overvaluation of print text was one of my first challenges working in the *threshold space* of 'data analysis' (Alecia Y. Jackson & Lisa A. Mazzei, 2013). When I began to transcribe the recordings of my accounts, the limitations of qualitative data analysis methods were apparent from the start.

My first text-based transcriptions already had lost the voice and pitch of the speaker and, in the case of video transcriptions, the images and peripheral sounds that formed part of the narrative. They also lacked the emotional context of the interview as a relational situation (Blake D. Poland, 1995).

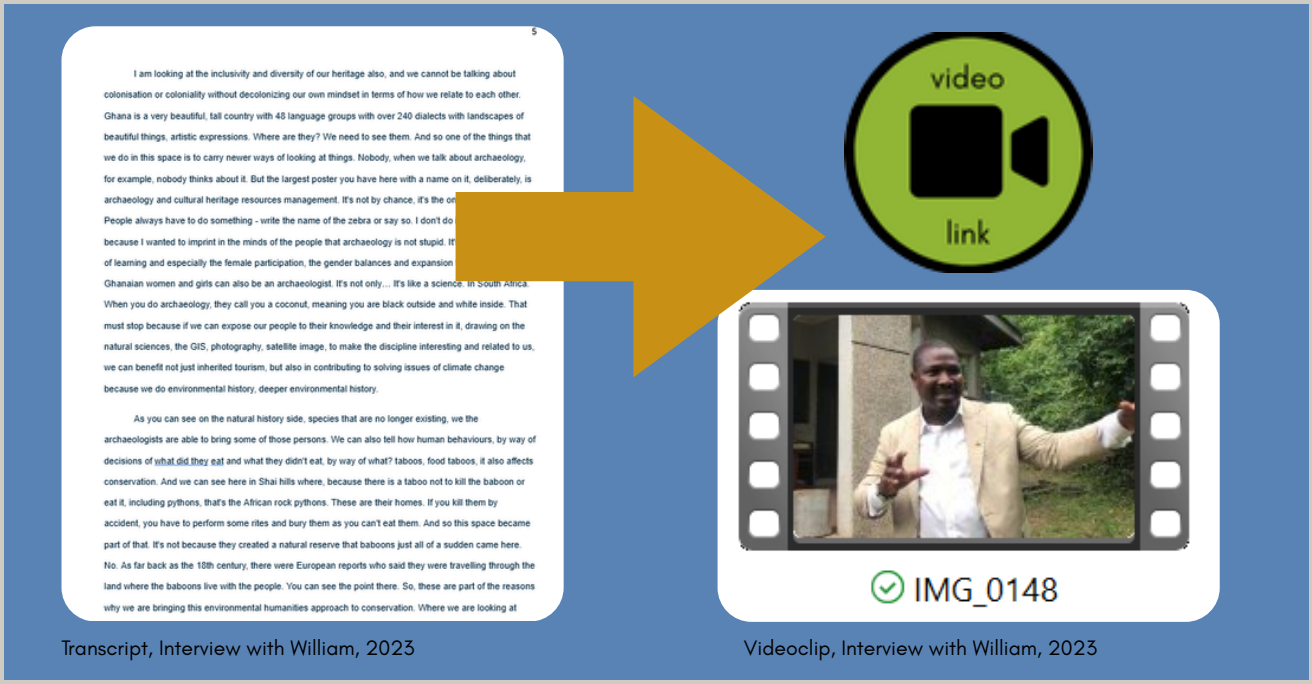


My colleague, Nabila Kazmi, and I began discussing what was missing from reading a transcription as opposed to listening or rewatching an interview. In her case, her interviews were in a language other than English so they would also require translation for an English reader. Spelling and grammar tools suggested ways to 'correct' the text to language more acceptably colonial in structure. This cleaning up of language creates valuation of what counts as correct language creating a power dynamic between speakers from different regions of the world (Carolyn McKinney, 2017).

Susan Ophelia Cannon (2018) describes her attempts to address these inadequacies through multimodal approaches such as poetry and art.

"In the liminal, I have to operate in relation" (p.580).

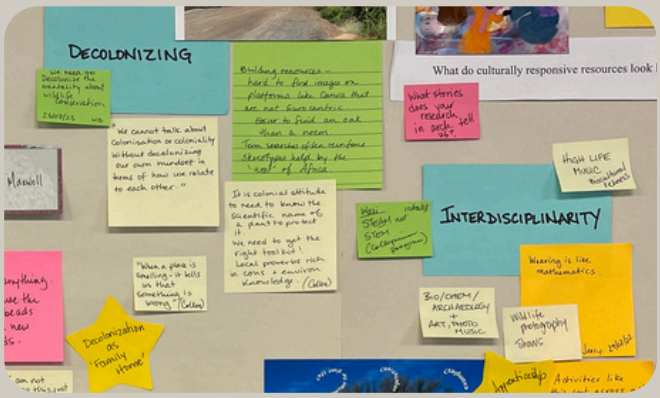
My interview in 2023 with William Gblerkpor took place at Shai Hills during a walking tour of the facility and surrounding grounds. This was not one of the first accounts I had recorded but it felt like the best place to start - not because of any logical framework but simply because I was the most excited about what he had said. In fact, it was not the first time I had listened to him explain the concept behind the Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai - His tour for Ann Stahl and I in 2022 was the reason that I had returned to the site a year later. The emotional connection I felt to his concept of Museum as family home had remained significant to me - the glow had continued to shine just as brightly when faced with immense amounts of data back in Canada months later.



Transcript, Interview with William, 2023

Videoclip, Interview with William, 2023

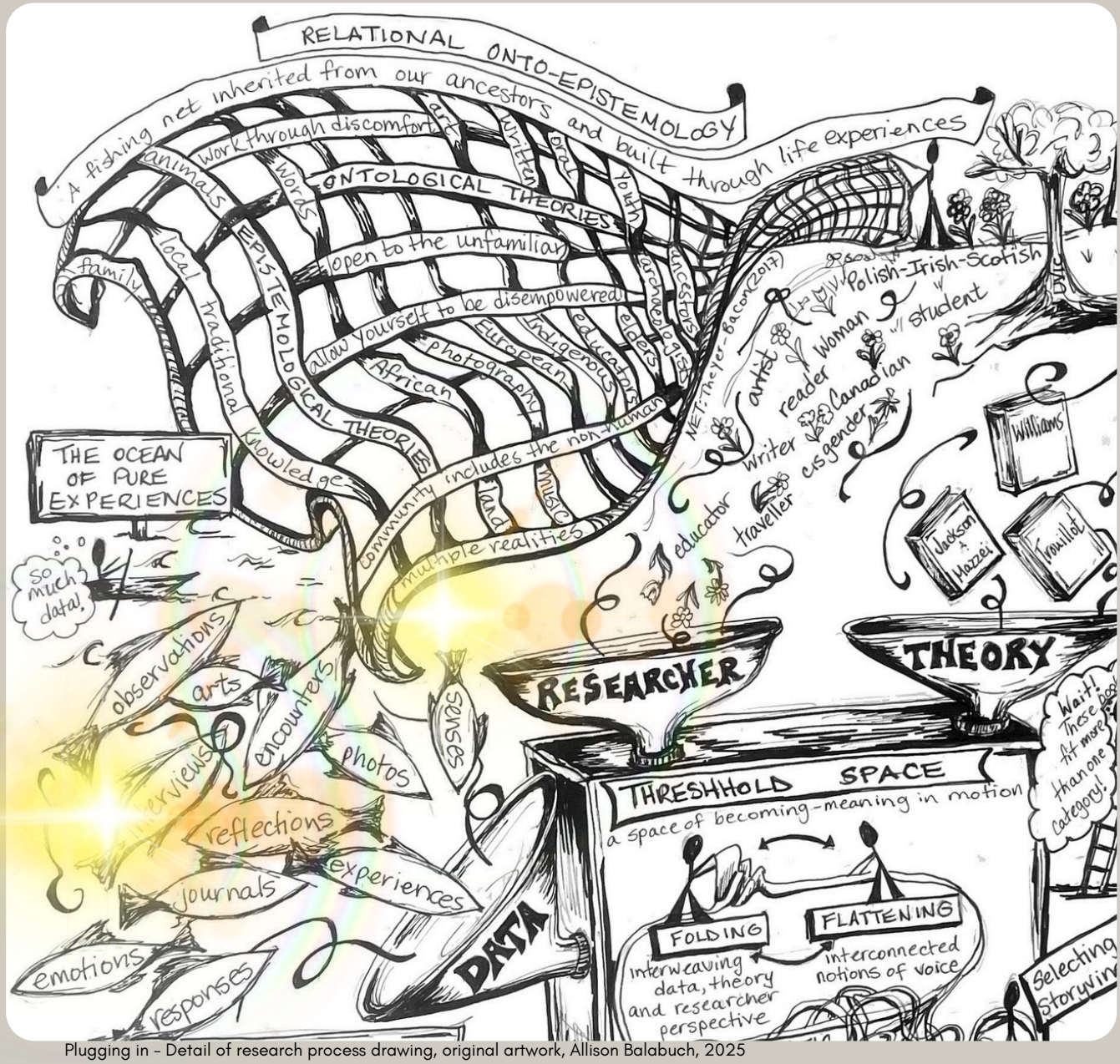
For me, the text-based versions lacked the voices of the speakers - the rich intonations and ways of speaking recognizably Ghanaian do not translate to print only. When I read them, I can hear the voices but an outside reader cannot.



Detail of data wall including sticky note quotes from the interview with William in 2023

I decided to forgo the complete transcriptions and instead only record the quotes that I felt were significant at that moment. The process of listening and relistening to the voices of the people I had the privilege to learn from during my two visits to Ghana was a richer, more recursive experience.

Like Barbara J. Thayer-Bacon's (2017) metaphor of a fishing net, I was casting for the information that resonated most - the information that glowed. My net was formed by the many theories that drove my research.



Plugging in - Detail of research process drawing, original artwork, Allison Balabuch, 2025

Because these quotes seemed partial without the accompanying images, I began printing the pictures that I had taken that were significant to the quotes. I made an attempt at using software or digital means of organizing my analysis however, I became frustrated with the lack of ability to see the big picture due to limitations of the tool. Hyperlinks and thematic coding programs help access data more quickly and efficiently but fail to reflect the overall rhizomatic picture as understandings emerged.

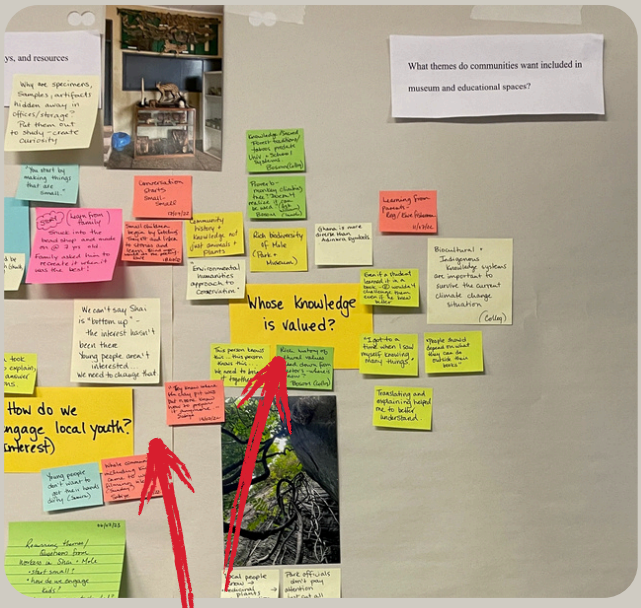
Assemblage wall

Armed with a fresh supply of sticky notes, chart paper, and masking tape, I moved to a physical data wall instead. I began to create the *assemblage* or *entanglement of encounters* emerging from my research.

For organizational purposes, I gave each human 'participant' voice a different coloured sticky note from sources such as including interviews, discussions, and research journal notes. I used masking tape to affix the photos I printed so that all the data on the wall could be moved around as needed throughout the process.



I also posted further questions that occurred to me throughout the process. Some of these questions became useful touchstones for my data wall while others were soon revealed to no longer have relevance to the stories that emerged. I left all the questions posted until the end in case a piece of data did resonate.



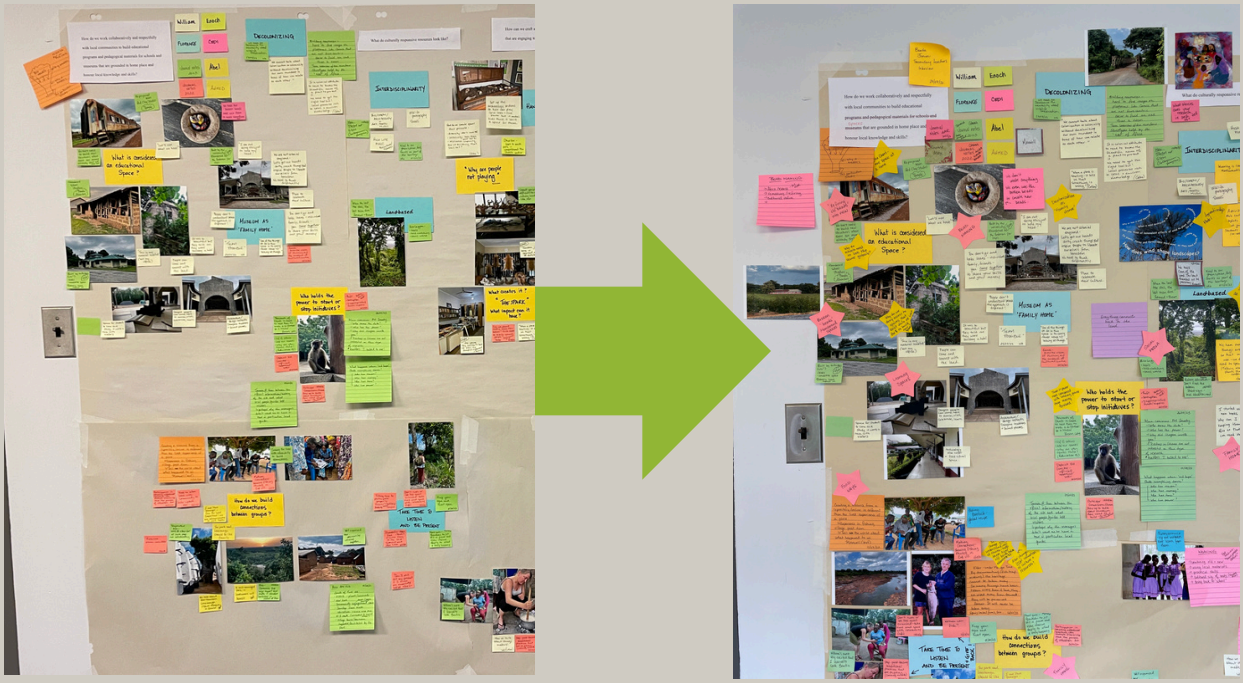
emerging questions

> "If we allow ourselves to be sensitive to the strangeness of the world, there are numerous things to stumble upon: In conversations, media, books, advertising, consumer objects, architecture, and everyday episodes and situations. Usually, these are not simply given, as "data," but, at certain times, they may cause us to stumble–and thereby become data" (Svend Brinkmann, 2014, p.724)

Questions and key words arose from the data as it came together - these questions or words were either directly from participants or were ideas that kept nagging at me as I created the assemblage.

I treated my photos as voices in their own right - I printed 5 batches of photos throughout my assemblage of the data wall. I chose some of the photos to print based on their connections with other voices but many I chose because they represented an idea or a significant learning event that glowed. Each photo and text-based note was a learning event into itself as well as a point in a greater story vine or rhizome.

"Never interpret: experience, experiment"
(Deleuze, 1995, p.87).



December, 2023 May, 2024

Through the process of folding and flattening, I added new photos, words, and ideas and I moved existing pieces around as connections were felt. The storyvines made themselves known through this process of relistening, reviewing, rereading, and pulling out the data that glowed.

Louise Lambert describes the whole body involvement of this post-qualitative approach as:
"Tentacular processes of sensing and making connections, allowing the stories to weave their threads together to allow a reconfiguring of experiences to emerge to new possibilities, new becomings and other stories"
(Louise Lambert, 2019, p.156).

As I worked through the process of adding to the wall, rearranging, relistening and reviewing, I was conscious of the emotional aspect of the data. Some of the photos I printed were from *sensual data (information you feel with your 5 senses)* and *emotional data (information you feel emotionally)* (Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, 1997) rather than more tangible words or images of learning.



Main road, Banda-Ahenkro, 2022

For example, in my first batch of printing I included a photo of three women in Banda collecting firewood. I came across these women on my daily evening walk. When I asked them if I could take their photo, they asked me if I would put it on Facebook. I assured them that I would not post it publicly and all three doubled over in laughter and protest.

"No - you put this on Facebook! Tell the world we are here."



Women collecting firewood and laughing at me, Banda-Ahenkro, 2022



The *sensual data* that I felt standing on that dusty village road in Banda with those women combined with the *emotional data* - my misunderstanding of their question and my presumption that they wouldn't want their photo shared - made this a significant encounter. As my data wall grew, this photo became a reminder of the responsibility I had to these communities that welcomed me so warmly and shared their knowledge with me.

If I am telling the world that they are here, I had better get it right.

Because my data wall grew larger over a few months, and because I was working from an office at the University of Victoria, and because it was literally on the wall, *response data* (Elizabeth Adams St. Pierre, 1997) also shaped the assemblage.



Assemblage wall, University of Victoria, 2024

My colleagues and friends would come in, examine the wall, and then ask about a particular photo. As I told the story of the photo, the significance often became clearer in the telling as did the connections to other photos and data. I folded in these tellings and retellings and it more often than not sparked me to print accompanying photos that helped to tell the stories. Rhizomatic story vines began to weave themselves across the data wall.

The importance of the non-human data also sat waiting for my attention. I moved the photo of the glass beadmaking mold around the wall so many times that I considered removing it!



Recycling broken glass beads into new glass beads, Ghana, 2023

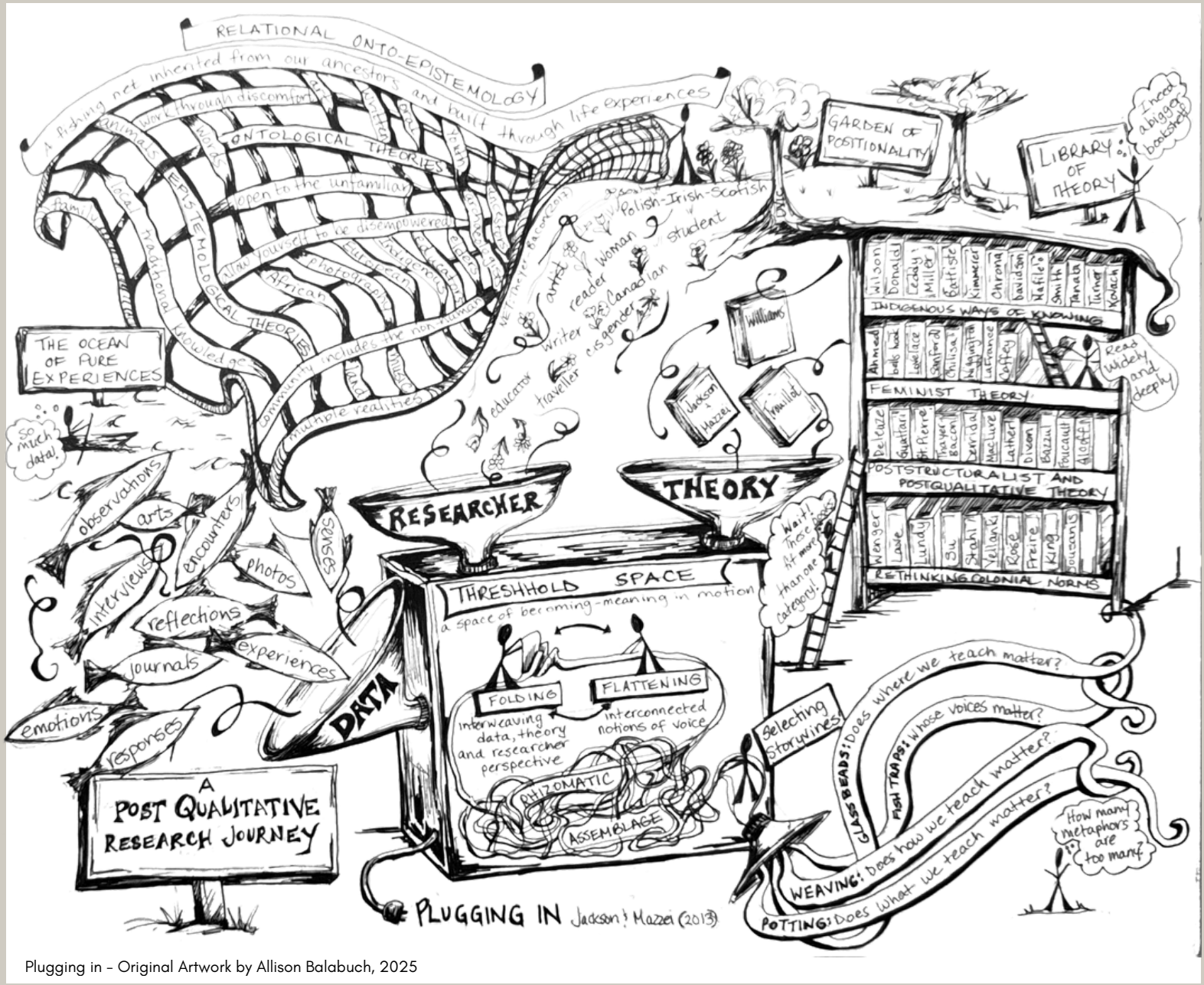
Finally one day, sitting and staring at the wall, I began to see that the artifacts or items - the fishtrap, the beads, the pots, and the weaving - connected to everything. They were actually another layer on top of the data wall. The items had literal significance and contained local knowledge but I could also see how they could be commandeered into helping to tell the stories of different sections of the vines or rhizomes.

They were objects, participants, and metaphors.

When this understanding emerged, I began moving the data onto separate chart papers by object metaphor. The objects had appeared across multiple encounters and in a variety of ways.



These story vines through object metaphor are my findings, my discussion, my significance, and my analysis all folded in together. The four story vines included in this dissertation represent only a fraction of what was possible.



Plugging in – Original Artwork by Allison Balabuch, 2025

Story vines

I invite the reader to consider these story vines as Giles Deleuze and Félix Guattari's (1987) *Lines of flight* - radical potentials for change. They are not a retreat or withdrawal from our current educational system but instead a breaking away that could lead to something new, creative, and transformative. A pathway to imagine a different world in education.

What can we learn from communities, schools, and museums in Ghana to decolonize education globally?



Glass beads by Mr. Cedi, Ghana, 2023

Glass Beads:

Does where we teach matter? Rethinking our notions of educational spaces



My attempt at weaving, Sabiye, Ghana, 2023

Weaving:

Does how we teach matter? The importance of decolonizing through weaving Indigenous ways of learning into our schools



Florence demonstrating potting, Doryumu, Ghana, 2023

Potting:

Does what we teach matter? The Importance of Indigenous and Local Knowledge in schools



Fish trap, Cultural Centre, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022

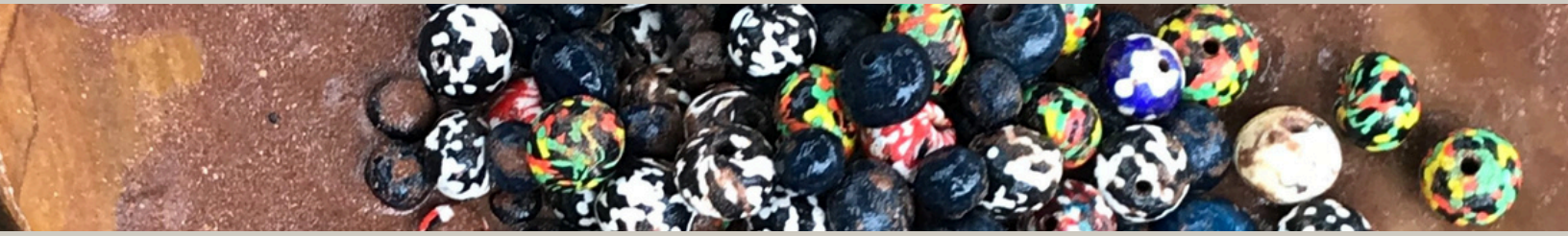
Fishtraps:

Whose voices matter? Decolonizing education through the co-creation of educational resources

Chapter Three: Glass beads



Shai Hills, Outdoor learning space, Ghana, 2023



Glass beads

Does where we teach matter?
Rethinking our notions of educational spaces

As I followed the rhizomes of my research journey to Ghana and back, and to Ghana and back again, I encountered the idea of physical education spaces in multiple contexts.

What can we learn from communities, schools, and museums in Ghana to decolonize education globally?

To understand what we can learn from communities, schools, and museums in Ghana, I draw on the following encounters in this chapter:

link **Cedi Beads, Odumase Krobo, Ghana** – a traditional glass bead making studio with Master Beadmaker Nomoda Ebenezer Djaba (better known as Cedi).

The Red Clay Studio, Tamale, Ghana – museum, art gallery, and educational space opened by Ibrahim Mahama, an internationally renowned Ghanaian artist.

Museum of Natural & Cultural Heritage at Shai, Ghana – Dr. William Gblerkpor explains his vision of a field school and community and school learning space

link **Mole National Park, Ghana** – National park reserve with tours, school learning programs, and a museum

Junior High Schools, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana and Victoria, Canada – I also draw on my experiences with physical educational spaces in both countries.

Cedi Beads



Nomoda Ebenezer Djaba (Cedi), Odumase Krobo, Ghana, 2023

In Odumase Krobo, in the Eastern Region of Ghana, Master Beadmaker Nomoda Ebenezer Djaba, better known as Cedi, welcomes me to his workshop with an infectious smile.

During my second visit to Ghana in 2023, William Gblerkpor arranged for me to learn about traditional bead making practices in Ghana from the owner of Cedi Beads.

The Krobo people have been making beads in Ghana for centuries, trading across the Sahara since the 8th century CE and through ocean-going trade in the 1400s (Philippe J. Kradolfer & Nomoda E. Djaba, 2020).



Glass beads have been made in many ways in Africa, from primary sources to the recycling of other beads and glassware that made its way around the continent through trade routes. Abidemi Babatunde Babalola, an African archaeologist who worked on the *African Archaeology Review* special edition (see Fish Traps chapter), told me about the misconception of glass work in Africa; although many sources indicate that glass making came from trade connections, the technology predates contact with the Middle East or Europe.

Evidence from research at Ile-Ife in Nigeria shows that primary glass work dates back to the 2nd millennium CE (Foreman Bandama & Abidemi Babatunde Babalola, 2023; Abidemi Babatunde Babalola, 2022).



Recycled glass beads, Cedi Bead collection, 2023



Bakelite beads, Cedi Bead collection, 2023



Cedi holding 2 glass beads made from recycled bottles, Odumase Krobo, Ghana, 2023

Cedi is a descendant of a long family tradition of bead making in the Krobo region and has travelled the world both teaching and learning about the complex art of glass bead making.

Cedi told me of his first bead. He had come home at the age of 7 from school for lunch and had snuck into the bead shop and to make a design. At first he was in trouble for being in the workshop unsupervised, but when his family saw his finished bead, they were impressed. They asked him to make more. Cedi had to leave the colonial school building to start learning the skill that would become his art and his livelihood.

Cedi's bead workshop is set in a beautiful tree lined courtyard with covered working and learning spaces, woodfired kilns, and processing stations. Along with bead production, Cedi is a teacher - he gives demonstrations and hands-on learning workshops on the property for all ages



Cedi Beads, kiln shed in background, Krobo, Ghana, 2023



Demonstration space, Cedi Beads, Krobo, Ghana, 2023

In Cedi's demonstration, he showed me how they pound down old glass bottles to make a fine powder that is then skillfully combined to make the patterns on the glass beads.



Cedi pounding glass into powder, Cedi Beads, Ghana, 2023

video link



Recycled Bottles sorted by types of glass that have the same melting point, Cedi Beads, Ghana, 2023



Cedi gets his bottles from local hotels and restaurants. Rather than being seen as garbage, they are treated as ingredients for new creations.



Broken and crushed glass goes into the molds, into the kiln, and the result are beautiful new beads.

Besides glass bottles that are recycled, broken beads are saved and reused as well to create new, beautiful beads.

video link



Glass beads made from broken beads, Cedi Beads, Ghana, 2023

Like using broken pots while potting (See Potting chapter) or creating brooms from discarded materials while mat weaving (see Weaving chapter), nothing is wasted.

A teaching that was repeated by many artisans and craftspeople in Ghana was that everything has a use - all parts of the materials we use have value.

What if we could use these teachings when considering educational spaces?

Educational spaces

When we imagine educational spaces, we often picture K-12 schools, universities, and (sometimes) museums. Researchers, and society as a whole, treat these three physical sites of learning separately, creating subcategories such as adult education, continuing education, public education, elementary education...

Why do we make such distinctions if the purpose of all three sites is to educate? One may argue that these sites differ greatly due to the age of the learners; however, is this innate or by design. Patrons of all ages have access to museum buildings but many exhibits are not created for children (or for the average adult).



University of Ghana, Legon, Accra, Ghana, 2023



Display case, Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, Ghana, 2023

Universities assume their learners have a basic minimum age since prospective students must first complete K-12 schooling to have access; however, it is universities that are teaching future teachers, museum curators, and educational researchers without connecting to other learning spaces.

Missing from this list of educational spaces is the home, the land, and the community.

Education spaces continue globally to follow a colonial model. Students are batched by age, ability, and held to standardized norms that privilege the written word. Museums mirror this model with heavily text-based displays behind protective glass. But as William Gblerkpor reminded me during my visit to Shai in 2023, “We are not Colonial England! We need to think differently.”

‘Ideal’ spaces

During my first trip to Ghana in 2022, I met a local politician who was very proud to tell me about his plans to build an ‘ideal’ school in the rural area of Banda. It would be a brand-new building with proper classrooms, technology, and even sleeping quarters for the students. They would be able to stay at the school and not have to go home each evening and waste precious study time on chores.

He also voiced that the absence of bad influences at home would help the students become more productive members of Ghanaian society. Part of his vision was to place the school on the same property as a guest house and residence so that the students could also learn some practical work skills.



School building, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022

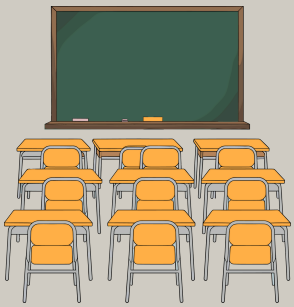
Sound familiar?

The definition of ‘ideal’ is sometimes used for describing perfect colonial schools - a brand new, well-organized building with all the modern conveniences and devoid of the messiness of community and culture. I became aware of the importance of physical places of learning during my time in Ghana. The idea of ideal educational spaces recurred throughout my research and resonated with my own experiences with learning spaces.

But what constitutes an ‘ideal’ educational space?

The current colonial school system that is still entrenched in both Canada and Ghana began in Europe during a time of global colonialism and Eurocentric racism. Most colonial school systems were designed to teach basic literacy skills along with arithmetic and religion (Francis Agbodeka, 2002; Carolyn Roberts, 2024). The systems in Ghana and Canada also had the goal of ‘civilizing’ the Indigenous populations (Vinvent Adzhalie-Mensah & Máiréad Dunne, 2019) and in the case of Canada, assimilating Indigenous peoples and erasing culture and language (Kristy Mcleod & Phyllis Webstad, 2025).

The privileging of book learning over hands-on apprenticeships or training fit the Western model of the 'knowing mind' as separate from the 'useful body' (David W. Plath, 1998). Better to read about the theory of glass bead making and the western science of pyrotechnology, then to try to actually make a bead. For students who are learning only to read, write, and count, the physical space requirements are quite simple.



Globally, what is celebrated as ideal consists of neat rows of desks and chairs where students can sit quietly and accomplish their paper-based tasks. The better the furniture, the better the school.

While I was visiting Junior high schools in Banda-Ahenkro in 2022, Jerry Sito first showed me the impressive new computer lab in his school before we visited his classroom.



Methodist School, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022

During our visit the next day to the Methodist School, he warned me beforehand that it did not 'look like' a good school but in fact the students performed better than most schools on exams. The school in question had three classrooms, with no walls. The assumptions that 'better looking' classrooms and schools will produce better learning and better exam results is a global phenomenon.

In Canada, many educators have begun to shift their physical classroom spaces by arranging desks in a circle, adding soft seating such as couches or bean bag chairs – mostly reserved for reading time and not the 'proper' lesson portion of learning. Even with these shifts in furniture placement, school building floorplans remain largely the same across the globe.



But what if we need to rethink these spaces entirely along with rethinking pedagogy?

In the spring of 2017, my middle school in Victoria, British Columbia, was experiencing a classroom shortage. The opportunity arose for me to move my grade 8 classroom into the old automotive shop in our school building. This space had been in use as school district archives for many years and most staff in our building did not even know the room existed.



School District Archives, Victoria, Canada, 2017

Like children passing through the wardrobe into Narnia, a few of my students and I borrowed a key and went to investigate.



School District Archives, Victoria, Canada, 2017

The room was filled with boxes, photographs, dust, and possibilities. The concrete floors were still marked with yellow safety paint where previous machines had stood. The garage door filled one wall. For the first time in my career, I had direct access out of the building from my classroom.

This was also my first opportunity in formal education to design an educational space. When district representatives consulted with me, offering to paint the floor or even better yet add some 'feature colours' on the metal beams in the ceiling to make the place a little 'brighter' -- I led them in a different direction. I didn't need to mask what was here to try and make it look like a standard classroom; I wanted functional changes.



Functioning garage door, my classroom, Victoria, Canada, 2017



Art shelving, my classroom, Victoria, Canada, 2025

"All I need is a sink, art shelving... and dance mirrors." My ideal was not the same as theirs.

Bare concrete floors, power outlets hanging from the ceiling, and a functioning garage door don't fit the model of an ideal classroom in a colonial image of school but for me, I saw opportunities to shift what learning spaces could be.

With sofas as seating options at the front of the room, spaces for students to sit at desks, and rugs for those who prefer to sit on the floor, I have tried to make space for the diverse needs of my students. The sofas placed at the front are intentional as it changes the message of school - you are allowed to be both comfortable and engaged in learning at the same time.



Front of my classroom, Victoria, Canada, 2017

The foldable tables can be stored easily for movement such as dance or theatre but are also light enough to move under power outlets for hands-on learning.



Garden, 2022



Garden, 2022



Garden, 2024

Directly outside my door is a small space that my students and I transformed into an Indigenous plant garden so that we could learn not only to recognize plants in photos but also by their smell, texture, and taste. Through a small grant from the World Wildlife Federation and through donations from friends of plants, we put in all edible plants that have been used for millennia on Vancouver Island. Rather than wait for my turn at funding for new furniture, I reached out to friends and scoured online marketplaces and roadsides for chairs, tables, and sofas to create the seating options. Like broken beads and old glass bottles, I reused what I found to create something new.

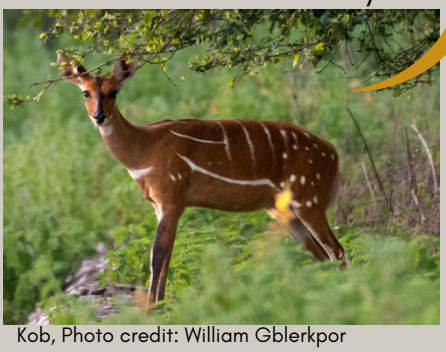
Museum as family home

William Gblerkpor took me on a tour of the Museum of Natural & Cultural Heritage at Shai on my first trip to Ghana in 2022. He explained the history of the people and the site as well as his concept of *Museum as Family Home*. William's enthusiasm for the project was as inspiring as the site itself. I returned the next summer to learn more in the museum at Shai

The museum emerges from the trees as you round the corner on the road that has taken you from the front gate of the park, past staff and visitor housing, and the fenced enclosures of zebra and ostrich (neither animal is indigenous to the lands around Shai but tourists like them).



Road from the park entrance up to the Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, Ghana, 2023



Kob, Photo credit: William Gblerkpor

Outside of fenced areas, you might see green monkeys sitting high on a branch or the beautiful kob - small, golden deer traveling in packs through the grasslands.

There is no choice but to take the time to greet, avoid, or observe families of baboons throughout the 15 minute walk. Baboons are not new to the area. There exist long-standing taboos with the local people not to kill or eat baboons. This protection, established well before the creation of natural reserves, demonstrates a deep-rooted respect for the balance of nature within the local communities.



Baboons waiting for more tourists to drop some lunch, park gates, Shai, Ghana, 2023

The hand-carved signs greet you as you approach the museum. *The Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai*. If you look back at old pictures, the name was originally the Museum of Natural and Cultural History. The change was an important one. William explained that the shift from *history* to *heritage* sends a clear message about the continuity of biocultural knowledge and existence that continues to flourish today.



Front steps/entry, Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, Ghana, 2023

Words matter.

When you walk around the gallery of the museum, you feel like you are straddling outdoor and indoor spaces. Even on a warm day, there is often a slight breeze bringing the sounds and smells of the land.



Inside/outside at the museum, Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, Ghana, 2023

The museum also displays posters showing archaeologists at work on local sites. These are combined with artifacts for visitors to see and touch, a library, and educational materials such as cameras and binoculars.



Artifacts on display, Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, Ghana, 2023



Library, Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, Ghana, 2023



Bones and Skins display, Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, Ghana, 2023

New ways of looking at things cover the walls of the museum entry and gallery. Large photographic prints of wildlife found across Ghana hang on every available wall space. Beautiful shots of flora and fauna taken by both William and his colleague Bosom Pixels come from all parts of Ghana.



Photographs on the walls at the Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, Ghana, 2023

William explains that the reason for calling the *Museum Natural and Culture Heritage at Shai* is to form a connection between similar sites and educational spaces such as the *Museum of Natural and Culture Heritage at Bui* and the *Museum of Natural and Culture Heritage at Mole*.

The arrangement of both photographs and artifacts from all of these parks brings the visitor into a more complete picture of Ghana.



Elephant bones the Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, Ghana, 2023



Animal skulls at the Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Mole, Ghana, 2023

William hopes that seeing animals that are from places such as Mole in the north of the country will inspire people to go and visit more biocultural heritage sites.

"Let's use what we already have. There's so much in the world, you don't need to build new structures." (William Gblerkpor, 2023).

The museum building at Shai was originally constructed in 2003 by the Forestry Commision but by 2013 it had already been abandoned to the bush.

"So the baboons made a home out of here and they were living here. So when you come, they will make threats, they pee, or they raise their eyebrows and move out, and then they will come and pillage. They do all kinds of crazy things for you to know that this place is not for humans. And we used to call it the Baboon Centre for human analysis. So the baboons were here to study humans. It was ridiculous. And so we thought maybe something can be done. And eventually, as our presence became dominant, they gave way, then once in a while, they come to test the water to see if we can yield or not. We haven't done so yet". (William Gblerkpor, 2023)



Baboon on the museum steps, Photo credit: William Gblerkpor.



The Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, Ghana, 2023

Unlike colonial structures that are organized in straight, orderly lines, the museum's circular structure is modeled after the traditional architecture of the Dangme people in the Shai area. This style predates rectangular homes and is inspired by the shape of the straw hats worn by priests and priestesses during ceremonies.

Echoing the idea of biocultural heritage, the building blends into the surrounding landscape with a facade that mimics the natural facade of the hills.

William explained that the circular feel of the space encourages visitors to return to spaces and move in a more organic flow rather than a clear beginning or end of the museum visit.

When renovations started in 2017, the building was home to not only baboons but birds, bats, and lizards. During my second visit to Shai in 2023, the agama lizards were constant companions, sunning themselves on the cement ramps and skittering past on walls and floors as I sat in the gallery to work on my research.



Baboons on the museum steps, Photo by William Gblerkpor.

It was also an evening task for the staff to scare off the baboons that would continue to test whether the humans had abandoned the space.

The only way to keep the baboons from moving back in is to have a human presence in the space all of the time.





Photos of the work crew during renovations, photos courtesy of William Gblerkpor.

William's vision was to rebuild this museum space using his concept of museum as family home. The concept of the *museum as family home* is based on the idea that museums can function like traditional family homes in Ghana and West Africa. In these cultures, family homes are often built and maintained through the collective effort of family and friends, who contribute their skills and resources. This approach emphasizes community involvement and shared responsibility, rather than relying on external funding sources like the government or NGOs.

The *museum as family home* concept, as applied to the Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai Hills, is about fostering a sense of ownership and belonging within the community. It encourages participation from individuals with diverse skills and backgrounds, similar to how families come together to build and support their homes.



Photos of the work crew during renovations, photos courtesy of William Gblerkpor.

William calls the people who have come together with the common goal of revitalizing this learning space "*Team Possible*". This approach aims to create a sustainable model for the museum, where its growth and development are driven by the passion and commitment of the community rather than solely depending on external funding.

In Banda, I heard the Nafaanra expression chɛchiɛri – bit by bit or 'small small', and this is how the museum is being renewed. As William and his friends, colleagues, and family have time, skill, and or resources to contribute to the museum, they have accomplished one project at a time.



Photos of the work crew during renovations, photos courtesy of William Gblerkpor.

chɛchiɛri

Red Clay Studio

Travelling north from Shai in 2023, I continued to find educational spaces in unexpected shapes and sizes.

The Red Clay Studio in Tamale was opened by Ibrahim Mahama, an internationally renowned Ghanaian artist. Housing not only Ibrahim Mahama's and other visiting artists' artwork and art installations, the site also houses learning spaces that push at the conventional notion of classroom.



Red Clay Studio, Tamale, Ghana, 2023

Besides brick buildings that house art displays, the site is covered in planes, trains, and the odd boat. My guide explained that each of these vehicles would have been considered garbage if they had not been rescued with the intention of repurposing the structures as 'classrooms'.



Repurposed train, Red Clay Studio, Tamale, Ghana, 2023

One airplane was already refitted as a computer lab – the train cars were being renovated into classrooms and dormitory spaces for weekend and holiday educational camps.



Repurposed planes, Red Clay Studio, Tamale, Ghana, 2023

The goal of the studio is similar to William's goals at Shai – reconnecting with local knowledge and decolonizing notions of learning, knowledge, and cultural heritage. These educational spaces glowed.

The space has been used in collaborative projects such as a workshop series for youth about solar power. The social enterprise Énergierich partnered with Ibrahim Mahama, as well as students and faculty from Tamale Technical University (TTU), and interns from Ashesi University to host workshops that would teach youth coding skills, robotics, and circuit assembly so that they could build their own solar panels (Dena Montague, 2022).



Greenhouse under construction, Red Clay Studio, Tamale, Ghana, 2023



Train tracks, Red Clay Studio, Tamale, Ghana, 2023

The goals of Red Clay Studio is to provide space for youth to learn skills and knowledge that they can share and put in practice in their communities. The planned greenhouses and train will help youth connect with local agricultural practices.

> Ibrahim Mahama's art work explores themes like globalization, labour, and the history and politics of material culture.

These 'educational spaces' show the power in using what we already have rather than waiting for outside funding to build a new ideal school that echoes colonial buildings. My garage, William's vision of learning spaces at the *Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai*, and Ibrahim Mahama's *Red Clay Studio* show the possibilities when we rethink and reuse.

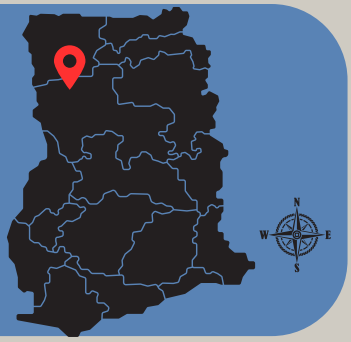


Shoeshine box installation by Ibrahim Mahama, Red Clay Studio, Tamale, Ghana, 2023

Mole National Park

After my inspiring visit to Red Clay Studio, I arrived at Mole National Park and was greeted by warm and knowledgeable staff - and more stories of educational spaces.

Mole is one of 7 national parks in Ghana located in the savannahland in the Northern part of the country. Home to a thriving elephant population as well as birds, other mammals, reptiles, and butterflies, the park is surrounded by 33 communities and villages.



The museum at Mole is housed in a small building connected to the visitor centre. Like the skins and skulls at Shai, the small space is full of specimens found in the park. School groups come often to the park to learn about biodiversity, heritage, and conservation. The education manager at the park, Bona Kiyiire, shared his vision of learning at Mole.



School visit, museum space, Mole National Park, Ghana, 2023

He would like to build stronger connections and programming to work with schools and surrounding communities so that the next generation understands the importance of biodiversity and conservation. Collaborations with neighbouring communities such as Mognori and Larabanga bring deeper connections and eco-tourism money.



Larabanga mosque is one of the oldest mosques in West Africa, Larabanga, Ghana. 2023



Village tours at Mognori, Ghana, 2023

He also showed me an educational space that almost was…

Across from the visitor centre sits a beautiful but unused building. Bona Kiyiire explained that it had been built by a foreign company as part of a road building project. The building unfortunately was poorly constructed and has been unusable since its finish – the walls and ceiling leak and the amount of remediation work to render it safe would be more expensive than starting over.



Unusable museum building (left) and faded sign erected by the companies that funded the museum (right) at Mole National Park, Ghana, 2023

And, like the museum building at Shai, the baboons have moved in.

Mole National Park hosts school groups like Shai but instead of a beautiful new building, they have to continue to make the best of their small museum space. Before heading out on safari to learn on the land, students participate in lessons under the trees outside the visitor centre. Sometimes the elephants join them.



Outside the museum and visitor centre, Mole National Park, Ghana, 2023

Their dream is to be able to expand the visitor centre and museum to broaden their educational programming.

University Field School

Back at Shai...

William's vision of the museum was to not only create this space for the community and school groups but also a space for university students to come and do their field work. Many departments at the University of Ghana at Legon have a field school but not one for archaeology. What if students could come and do their work while the building is open to the public?

This space could bridge the divide between university, museum, and K-12 education. Archaeology students could show school students and visitors the actual work they do and this would not only help educate them about the heritage of the area, it would also show the rich contributions that archaeology can make to building a deeper understanding of Ghanaian history.



University of Ghana, Legon, Department of Archaeology, Accra, Ghana, 2023

Visitors could come on the weekends and participate in archaeological work on the site as well as see and handle real artifacts of Ghana's past and present. Visiting K-12 students could also interact with working archaeologists and the community.

"It is also to help to inspire our young people to dig, put their hands into things and remove these artifacts. I always tell my people here, bury them, but they keep them on the surface and see archaeology is on the surface... bury them, hide them! Let them just come and dig things out themselves." (William Gblerkpor, 2023)



Hands-on archaeological activity, Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage, at Shai, Ghana, 2023

William's vision of educational spaces extends from the building into the surrounding land. William talked as we walked around the site about his plans:

- Plans to create walking trails and active archaeological dig sites so that people could come and visit on the weekend, talk with archaeologists, and learn from the land.



- Plans to plant the types of local plants that would encourage butterflies and allow visitors to learn botanical knowledge.



- Plans for a dormitory in another abandoned building on the site. He had started the renovation on the dormitory building but was stopped by the park officials as they said they had plans to build a hotel on the site. The hotel has never been built and so neither has the dormitory. Despite time, money, and volunteer work to get the project started, it now stands empty.

William was basing the field school idea on the University of Kansas where the national parks employ archaeologists and anthropologists from the national universities who work with them. By working in the parks, they can teach fewer courses in the university and get paid from the university. People have asked William why he does this work as it takes time away from activities such as publishing academic papers that will count towards forwarding his career.

"So you want to do this and somebody asks? So how many papers are you going to get out of it? Because it's not in the papers, the articles that will count. But if we say we want to continue counting papers and titles, I don't think we will be happy. I'm happy because I saw an abandoned bush and turned a bush into a place you and I are standing to be with the help of friends and family. And that, for me, is what the universities must be doing." (William Gblerkpor, 2023)

Besides reusing buildings that already existed, William also brought specimens, museum display cases, and other abandoned furniture from the University of Ghana, Legon, to create the educational spaces at the museum. He pointed out that many items are kept in storage in universities where no one has access except a select few scholars who come to study.

Rather than sitting in a storage room, it is better to display the objects once in storage to encourage people to want to learn more about natural and cultural heritage in Ghana.



Specimens from existing collections, Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, 2023

"Universities in developing countries must not behave as if we were in colonial England, where there's so much money from everywhere that people are just philosophyzing. Do that philosophyzing - I'd like to think and to propound new theories and ideas. But let's get our hands dirty, also and create things that can inspire people to the level where we can liberate ourselves from this boredom" (William Gblerkpor, 2023).

As we return to Legon campus at the University of Ghana, William drives me past another building. Like the dormitory, the building sits empty. William has asked the university if it can be used for the arts - a place to highlight music, photography, and arts to celebrate Ghanaian culture and heritage. Like the possible dormitory at Shai, the power dynamics of who has the rights to use a space overshadows the possibilities. The building is left empty while those in power argue about ownership and the right to use it.



Unused building, University of Ghana at Legon, Accra, Ghana, 2023, Photo credit: William Gblerkpor

Power

Who has the power to 'create' educational spaces and who has the power to control them?

Who owns the right to make decisions and who will pay for it? Red Clay Studios has been able to make their own decisions about educational spaces because they are a private enterprise. Even with funding, the unusable museum building at Mole shows that new is not always better especially when it is built by outsiders who have no personal connection to the land or the local culture.



Airplane as classroom space, Red Clay Studio, Tamale, Ghana, 2023

William points out that we need to think differently if we want to decolonize Ghanaian history and education:

> "Europeans, British, sent anthropologists in the 17th century to write about it. And then that becomes the only history we know in Ghana. Archaeology gives us the power to search for newer knowledge and ideas" (William Gblerkpor, 2023).



Office space, University of Victoria, Canada, 2022

Decolonizing educational spaces such as museums, universities, and classrooms is difficult when the systems don't want to change or when those in power have the privilege to ignore or maintain the status quo. We have spent so long in the colonial system, it is difficult to see any other way to design learning spaces (Carolyn Roberts, 2025).

Sandra Styres, Dawn Zinga, Spencer Lilley, and Huia Tomlins-Jahnke (2019) describe education as a contested space - "shared spaces where disparate worldviews collide" (p.xvii). It is within these contested spaces that entrenched colonial structures are being challenged by Indigenous and local knowledge systems globally - classroom by classroom.

According to William, it has been difficult for those in power connected to the museum at Shai to understand that William's motivation is not personal gain but a shared benefit for the community and all Ghanaians. The colonial system that ties motivation with capital gain and power cannot make sense of a community and family effort that will benefit the greater good and not one person's bank account.

Back in Canada, my garage classroom has also been under attack from the expectations of the colonial system, in the past year my sofas were removed as 'end of life' - too old to be safe in the classroom, the same has happened with my technology -- 24 chromebooks were removed as, although they were perfectly functional, they were 'too old' but there is no funding to replace them.



Pile of soft seating determined to be 'end of life' stacked ready for removal, Victoria, Canada, 2025



Indigenous strawberry and blackberry plants mowed over, Victoria, Canada, 2025

My Indigenous plant garden has been razed twice by grounds keeping staff that could not recognize it as a garden without fences.

Is decolonization possible? Can we let go of the vision of a one room school house with neat rows of desks?

Although fire safety was given as the reason for the removal of my sofas, a district official told me that it was also about ensuring that 'academic spaces looked academic'.

The stories of Cedi Beads, Red Clay Studio, the Museum of Natural & Cultural Heritage at Shai, and even my garage classroom in Canada, confirm a powerful but uncomfortable truth: Decolonization is not a singular act of structural renovation; it is a relentless, sustained ideological battle against systems designed to maintain the colonial status quo.

Looking forward

What can we learn from communities, schools, and museums in Ghana to decolonize education globally?

The "ideal" educational space, as globally demonstrated by the colonial model, is comprised of neat rows of desks and privileges passive listening over the useful body (John Dewey, 2001). This enduring paradigm is why functional, community-driven projects are often undermined. The unusable, externally-funded building at Mole stands as a monument to outsider failure. The removal of soft seating from the garage classroom to ensure the space 'looked academic' reveals that resistance is often rooted in appearances and perceived institutional order, rather than genuine safety or pedagogical merit. Like Cedi reusing and recycling materials to make new beautiful beads - we need to think about reusing what we have for educational spaces.



School group visiting the Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, Ghana, 2023

The future of decolonized education does not depend on institutional permission or external wealth. It rests entirely on radical resourcefulness and unwavering commitment such as the model of *museum as family home*. The transformative examples in Ghana demonstrate that educational power is reclaimed by those who embody the philosophy that everything has a use - all parts of the materials we use have value.

Whether transforming abandoned vehicles into learning hubs at Red Clay Studio, or reusing materials from university storage that would otherwise be inaccessible to the public at Shai, the focus shifts from acquiring new resources to honoring existing knowledge and materials.



Train classrooms at Red Clay Studio, Tamale, Ghana, 2023

Educational institutions - museums, schools, and universities - need to work together. The only truly ideal educational space is not a building at all, but the commitment of a community willing to fight for its right to define, create, and sustain learning on its own terms.

Chapter Four: Weaving



Shai Hills, Ghana



Weaving

Does how we teach matter?

Decolonizing education through weaving Indigenous ways of learning into our schools

The practice, the learning, and the teaching of weaving also informs what we need to do to decolonize education - both in Ghana and in Canada.

What can we learn from communities, schools, and museums in Ghana to decolonize education globally?

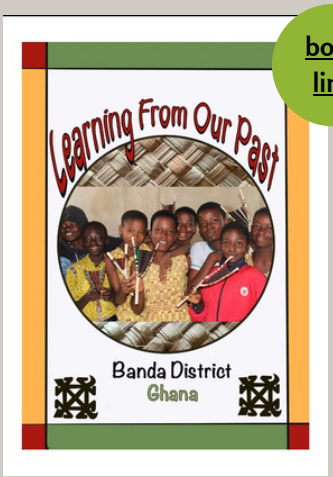
I did not set out to focus on weaving at the beginning of my research, however, I encountered weaving multiple times and it wove its threads throughout my projects. I draw on these experiences in this chapter.

website link

Sabiye, Ghana - As part of the *Endangered Material Knowledge Programme (EMKP)* funded by the British museum, I had the opportunity to learn how to document the knowledge of Owusu Alexander, a master mat weaver, with Dr. Ann Stahl and the research team including Enoch Mensah, Patrick Mensah, and Zonke Guddah. I also was given the opportunity to learn how to weave.



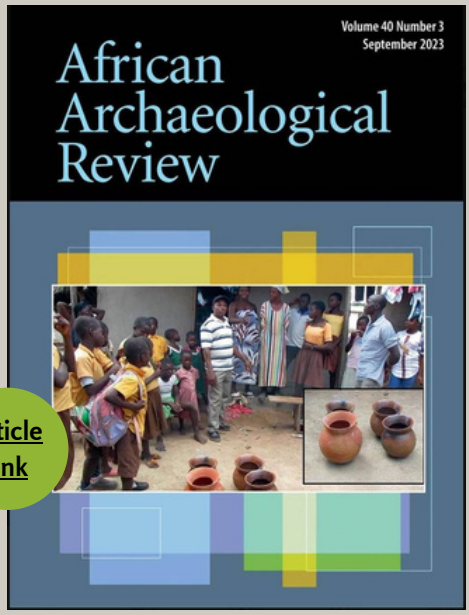
Owusu Alexander, Master weaver, Sabiye, Ghana, 2022



book link

Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana - Working with teacher Jerry Tsito, I worked in 4 Junior High School classes to get feedback on my draft of the Banda school resource *Learning from our Past* funded as a part of the "Improving African Futures Using Lessons from the Past" (IAfF) Partnership Development Project funded by SSHRC. While I visited classrooms, I also facilitated hands-on weaving activities with students.

Victoria, Canada - Through my work on the special issue of *African Archaeological Review* - Archaeology in support of School Learning, funded by SSHRC, I co-wrote an article with Bako Rasoarifetra, an archaeologist from Madagascar who has worked in her country to bring traditional weaving education to schools.



Article: *Why Weaving? Teaching heritage, mathematics, science and the self*

article link



Weaving projects, Victoria, Canada, 2022

I also worked with my draft of the Banda school resource and with hands-on weaving instruction in Canada in my grade 8 classroom to inform my work with both Jerry Tsito and Bako Rasoarifetra.

What I learned through my research journey is that weaving holds valuable lessons for our understanding of how to decolonize education.

Experiential, relational, and interdisciplinary models, as well as place-based learning and Indigenous principles of learning are one step towards meaningful change.

Why weaving?

I began developing an interest in weaving during a continuing studies course at UVic in 2019. The course was a one-day introduction to archaeobotany with archaeologist Aurora Skala. As an ethnoarchaeologist, Aurora had examples of baskets and hats that she had woven in the effort to better understand the craft of weaving.



Examples of weaving from Aurora Skala, UVic Continuing Studies, Victoria, Canada, 2019

At the end of the class, I approached her and asked if she had ever taught weaving as a hands-on practical class. It was one thing to understand the theory behind the craft but I wanted to learn to make things myself. It was through making that I would really understand weaving.

Aurora agreed to host a five week, cattail hat making class for four aspiring weavers at her home that spring. For five spring Saturdays, we sat together in a circle of women in the sunshine of Aurora's garden and learned to twist and wind the cattail fronds into a wearable if not fashionable hat. We also had the space and time to talk and learn about each other's lives as we worked together on each others' projects.



Isolde Welby and I weaving together in the garden at Aurora's house, Victoria, Canada, 2019

Like most types of weaving I have tried, there are often times that four hands are better than two and like any hands-on learning, one teacher is never enough.

As one of us learned a step, we would then help the next person with their hat.



In progress cattail hat, Victoria, Canada, 2019

I was proud at the end of the five weeks to sport my beautiful hat but I was sad to no longer have the companionship of my weaving ladies on a Saturday afternoon. It was not only making hats but making community.

Indigenous models of learning

> "While all humanity's knowledge bases are drawn similarly by experience, cultural transmission, and experimentation, not all peoples equally value those experiences" (Marie Battiste, 2013, p.159).

The traditions of learning in communities globally before the industrialization of the colonial school system differ by region but share many common themes across continents, nations, and peoples. Some common threads of Indigenous models of education are that learning is experiential, relational, and needs to connect to a sense of identity and the land. Learning takes time and patience. (Gloria Snively & Wanosts'a7 Lorna Williams, 2016; Jo Chrona, 2022; Shannon Leddy & Lorrie Miller, 2024).

As I worked on the array of weaving projects in Ghana and Canada during my research, I learned the importance of these principles in practice.



Original artwork by Allison Balabuch, published in Allison Balabuch & Ann Stahl, 2023

Learning and teaching weaving

Dr. Wanosts'a7 Lorna Williams, from the Lil'wat Nation in British Columbia, Canada, describes this feeling of community in her language as *Kamúcwkalha*. *Kamúcwkalha* is the Lil'wat word for "the felt energy indicating group attunement and the emergence of a common group purpose" (Kathy Sanford, Wanosts'a7 Lorna Williams, Tim Hopper, Catherine McGregor, 2012, p. 23). While I worked with my fellow weavers on those Saturday afternoons, I experienced this group attunement and joy of not only creating but also connecting and learning with and from others.



Finished cattail hat, Victoria, Canada, 2019

Sabiye, Ghana

In July, 2022, the research team squeezed into the little white truck, packed with sound and camera gear, and headed to the village of Sabiye down the rural roads that snake through the Banda District, Bono Region, Ghana. With Patrick Mensah and Enoch Mensah from the Banda Heritage Initiative Committee in the back, and Zonke Guddah, a fellow Ghanaian PhD student from the University of Victoria (UVic), and I in the front, we were there to learn from and with Dr. Ann Stahl - an archaeologist and anthropologist who has worked with the communities of Banda for 40 years.



Example mat found in the Cultural Centre at Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022

We were off to document the creation of the traditional palm raffia mat, called Dɛŋglɛ in Nafaanra, with master weaver Owusu Alexander as a part of the *Endangered Material Knowledge Programme* Grant from the British museum.

link

Similar to some of the raffia weaving I had seen in other parts of the globe, I was keen to learn how to create the intricate patterns of the mats.

In that tightly packed white truck, I felt the same sense of *Kamúcwkalha* as I had felt weaving hats. A collegial hum filled the truck cab as we passed local farms, slowing down for potholes, speed bumps, and the multitude of sheep and goats taking siestas on the warm pavement of village main roads. Enoch Mensah, a local man from the Banda area, had been working with Ann Stahl for years on many different archaeology and community heritage projects. Patrick, Zonke, and I all came from different experiences and backgrounds and were all eager to learn from not only Ann Stahl and Enoch Mensah, but also Owusu Alexander, the weaver.

We bumped along the road talking and laughing until we poured out of the truck near a steep ditch in the heart of Sabiye. We had already made initial visits to the village to follow local protocols, greet the weaver and the elders, sign ethics forms, and to harvest and prepare the palm raffia fronds needed to weave. Today, we were starting the weaving process and the spirit of group attunement was not only confined to the little white truck.



Research team and community members documenting raffia palm harvest, Sabiye, Ghana, 2022



Zonke Guddah and Patrick Mensah setting up the documentation of mat weaving with community in the background, Sabiye, Ghana, 2022

Community members pulled up chairs, stools, or found places to park themselves around the courtyard in Sabiye to participate as an audience to the documentation of Owusu Alexander and his craft. Because it was a Sunday, children and women joined the usual circle of men that made up the daily spectators.

While Owusu Alexander demonstrated his weaving, he also talked about the importance of learning and making while being in community.

"Some of the reasons why weavers would choose to sit among others while working is that sometimes you feel lonely sitting alone working. Sitting among others, hearing what they say, sometimes makes you laugh. It is all part of the joy of the work. I was told that in the olden days weavers were working in groups. Sometimes they will come together and weave. This made people feel fine—let me go and join my fellows so that we can work together"
(Owusu Alexander, 2022 - translated by Enoch Mensah)



Owusu Alexander demonstrating weaving, Sabiye, Ghana, 2022

Owusu Alexander actually learned his craft at school from a master weaver when he was a boy. Like the inclusion of potting in schools in Bonakire (see potting section), Owusu Alexander learned to weave mats at school from master weaver Wulombo Kwabena Donkor when ancestral skills like mat-making were a part of the official curriculum.

"I learned from school the way that my ancestors did the work," Owusu Alexander explained.

If Owusu Alexander learned in school from a community member who was a master weaver - Where is this hands-on learning in schools now?



Owusu Alexander demonstrating weaving, Community members watching his demonstration, Sabiye, Ghana, 2022

Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana

Jerry Tsito, a local Banda teacher, is working to change this.



Jerry Tsito and 2 students from the Model Girls' School looking at the resource draft and learning to weave, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022

Besides learning to document traditional material knowledge and learning to weave, I was primarily in Banda to share and receive feedback on the school resource I had been developing from afar - *Learning from our Past*. Jerry was my host in Junior high school classrooms in Banda-Ahenkro to share the draft of the book with students and do some hands-on learning.

Jerry Tsito wanted to do a hands-on activity while we visited 4 Junior high school classes to see student responses to the book draft and we settled on a weaving activity as it required less costly materials than trying to find something like clay to pot.



Student project, Loom in Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022



Student project, Loom in Victoria, Canada, 2022

He found the materials to make 4 peg looms modelled on the ones I had used in my classrooms in Victoria.

Besides one communal loom per class, we used y-shaped sticks as structures so that all the students could participate individually - sticks could be found for free by any student rather than the cost of nails and boards.



Y-shaped stick loom, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022



Students at the Model Girls School in Banda-Ahenkro helping each other to warp the y-shaped stick loom, Ghana, 2022

Splitting their time between looking through the pages of the book draft, they wove their creations on the sticks they had brought to class. We also demonstrated how to string and weave on the larger peg looms that Jerry had built.

Victoria, Canada

In Canada, I did my first weaving project with my grade 8 students while I was writing the draft book section about weaving before visiting Banda in 2022. My Canadian students were about the same age as the target Ghanaian students and I wanted to try my activities and have them work with the text to judge if the level and content were of interest to young learners. My experiences weaving with my students in Canada also helped me to co-plan the weaving projects in Banda.



Student weaving project, Victoria, Canada, 2022

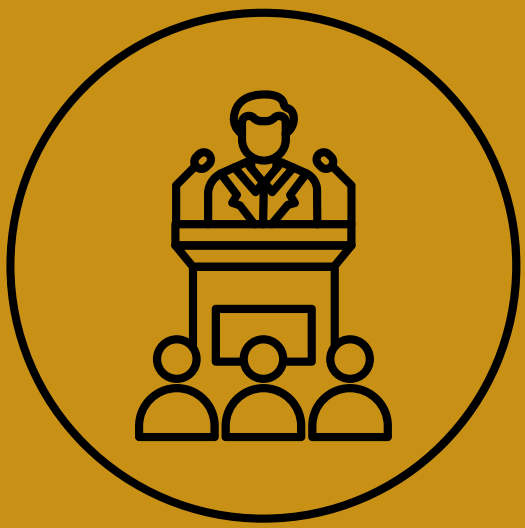
Experiential or embodied learning

Embodied learning or experiential learning is one of the biggest losses in the colonial school model. As human beings, we need to experience learning in order to really learn how to not only reproduce them but to make connections across other learning – "we need to try things out for ourselves and feel knowledge in a lived way" (Shannon Leddy & Lorrie Miller, 2024, p. 55). This loss of first order experience and also connection to cultural heritage is what Jerry Tsito is trying to bring back to students in Banda.

"The more you work with your hands, you sharpen your brain too. If we put this in our curriculum, we will have people that can do things with their hands" (Jerry Tsito, 2022).

Weaving is an embodied activity; It is an example of what Mitchell J. Nathan (2022) terms a *first order experience* – hands-on learning – rather than a *second order experience* that asks us to learn the theory before taking up the practical. The educational system that prioritizes still bodies and quiet listening only to a teacher explaining theory rather than working side-by-side with a master or elder was developed through the industrialization in the global North and spread through colonial networks. It was only universalized in the twentieth century yet it continues to be held up as a model of education globally (Allison Balabuch & Ann Stahl, 2023).

Paulo Freire (2000) describes this head-model as the *banking model of education* – "in which the scope of action allowed to the students extends only as far as receiving, filing, and storing the deposits" of information (p.72).



Know-do-understand

One model of embodied learning is the *Know-do-understand model (province of British Columbia, 2025)*. The ***know*** – information and theory often taught through second order experiences, books, and lessons is given equal place to the ***do*** – skills, and competencies learned through first order experiences. Both aspects are necessary to build an **understanding** of a bigger idea.

In Sabiye, I had the opportunity to learn about weaving practices through experience as well as observations.

Owusu Alexander agreed to try to teach me the basics of mat weaving. The technique is much different than any other types of weaving that I have tried. The thin strands of raffia are like a tangle of spider webs wrapped around my fingers as I try to puzzle out the instructions from my teacher.



Owusu Alexander trying to teach me to hold the raffia to begin the weaving process, Sabiye, Ghana, 2022



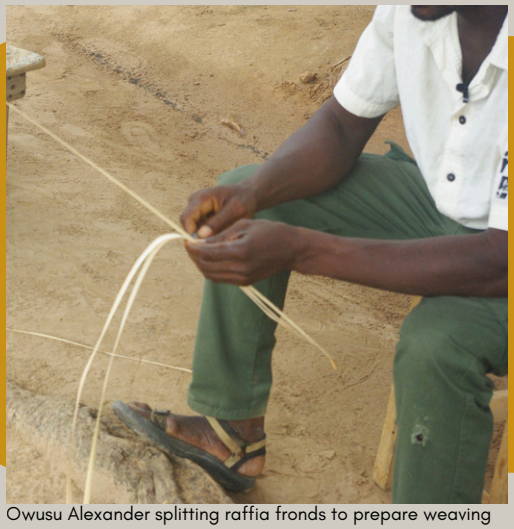
Owusu Alexander attempting to help me correct my hand position to better hold the raffia, Sabiye, Ghana, 2023.

I did already know a bit about raffia weaving – I have read about this style of weaving but nothing compared to the actual experience of holding the materials. I took my fledgling strip of mat home with me and continued to practice between sessions with Owusu Alexander.

Through the process, I felt what it meant to learn in the *know-do-understand* model. My understanding was significantly richer.

Know

Owusu Alexander explained that each strip of raffia had to have a consistent width when preparing them for weaving. It was also important to remove the stiff parts and keep only the supple strands. He also showed us that the colour can be slightly different which can be used to make patterns.



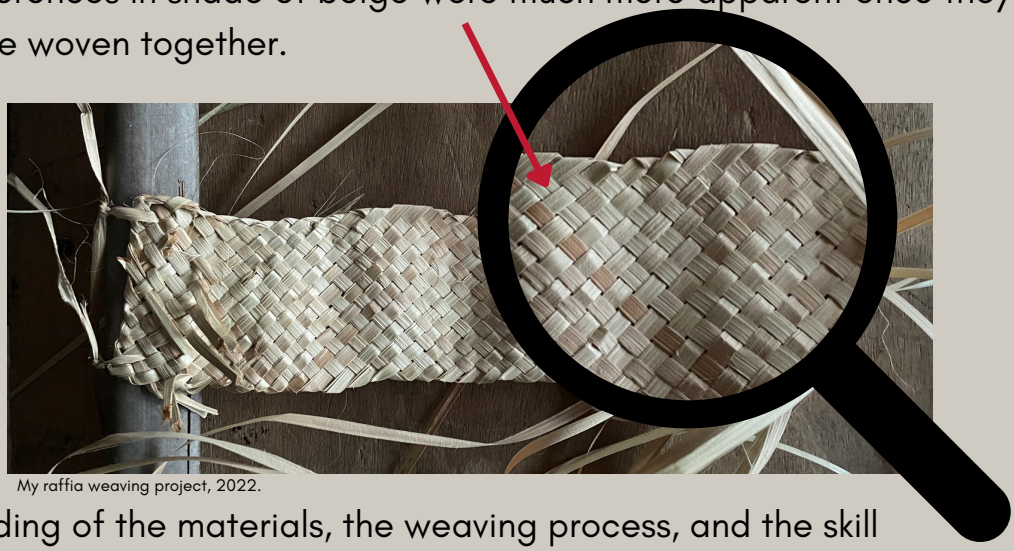
Owusu Alexander splitting raffia fronds to prepare weaving materials, Sabiye, Ghana, 2022



Raffia materials sorted by processed, unprocessed, and waste materials to be used elsewhere, Sabiye, Ghana, 2022

Do

As I started to learn the weaving process, I could feel what he meant about the size, colour, and thickness of the fronds. Thicker fronds left a raised finish and were harder to work with. The slight differences in shade of beige were much more apparent once they were woven together.



My raffia weaving project, 2022.

Understand

My understanding of the materials, the weaving process, and the skill involved in this type of weaving would not be as deep if I had only listened to the explanation or read about the process in theory. When Ann Stahl was writing material about mat weaving for the British Museum's Endangered Material Knowledge Programme, she also used my beginner weaving to help explain the process. I had a better understanding of what needed to go in the school resource *Learning from our Past* as my embodied learning of the process highlighted what was important.

Understanding something deeply requires both *knowing* and *doing (Tim Ingold, 2013)*



Enoch Mensah filming while translating during mat weaving documentation, Sabiye, Ghana, 2022.(Patrick Mensah and Zonke Guddah in background)

During an interview with Enoch Mensah in 2022, he explained that he has learned many things over the years through his role as a translator. Translating and explaining helped him to understand things better. Although he never went to university to study archaeology, he learned much over the years working with Ann Stahl on everything from archaeological digs and community heritage projects. He told me that sometimes a graduate student would come to work onsite and would only have the theoretical knowledge they learned in books.

Enoch said that he would not try to correct them even when he could see they were about to make an error or when they lacked the practical learning and knowledge that he possessed through experience. He said, "I got to a time when I saw myself knowing many things." These things were not always respected by those who saw their formal university education as superior to his deeper hands-on experience. "People need to depend on what they can do outside their books" (Enoch Mensah, 2022).

The students may have known theoretical information, but the *doing* of archaeology needed to be learned in the field. This embodied or experiential approach, grounded in a *Know-do-understand* model is also what William Gblerkpor was trying to build at the museum in Shai (See Fish Traps chapter). "We must have research centres also across this country because that is the way we can take the discipline to our people - because we are studying our people". He stresses the importance of this work: "I think we are privileged to be the people responsible for studying our people" (William Gblerkpor, 2023).

Learning is relational

Embodied learning experiences build relationships between students, teachers, and local community experts as well as relationships to the past and future. Communities in Ghana, like Indigenous communities globally, traditionally learned through apprenticeship models where young people learned their crafts and skills from elders. In *communities of practice*, learning is relational.

Within a community of practice, learning is understood as a holistic process where the entire person becomes a full member of the learning community and society. This happens through participation. Initially, we as learners enter the community as "novices" or "new apprentices" and engage in activities from the margins or peripheries. This method of acquiring knowledge through engagement is called **"legitimate peripheral participation"** (Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger, 1991, p.35-40).



As Ahmed learns to use the peg loom from me, he demonstrated to his peers at the African Faith Tabernacle School, Banda-Ahenkra, Ghana. 2022

Experienced members provide guidance and serve as examples, assisting the novices as they encounter challenges.



Students from the Model Girls' School and the Methodist school showing a group woven project, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022

The progression from *newcomers* to *old-timers* means moving from the edges to become full participants (apprentices becoming masters). As individuals move toward this full participation and engage in collective activity, they contribute to the emergence of a common group purpose. The shared activity and successful movement toward full membership creates the state of *Kamúcwkalha - the shared energy of group attunement.*

The colonial or banking model of learning cannot allow for this type of relational learning to happen as it presumes that only one person in the room – *the teacher* – holds knowledge.



Students teaching students.

Students helping each other to problem solve while learning to weave at the African Faith Tabernacle School, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022

An activity like weaving is impossible to teach in the banking model framework. I could not help an entire class start a project and maintain the attention necessary to help each student problem-solve at different rates.

However, through the community of practice, the students began taking up another Lil'wat word shared by Dr. Wanosts'a7 Lorna Williams: *A7xekcal*. *A7xekcal* embodies valuing our own expertise and considering how it helps the entire community beyond ourselves (Kathy Sanford, Wanosts'a7 Lorna Williams, Tim Hopper, & Catherine McGregor, 2012). Each student was learning to weave at different rates and they began to take up the role of teacher when they could see that their expertise was needed by fellow students.



I have seen many teachers throughout my career in Canada express the difficulty of teaching everything through project-based or hands-on learning model with large classes. I have learned that teaching hands-on skills is impossible in a colonial construct where the teacher is the only knowledge keeper. This type of teaching and learning is only possible when we take up learning as a community of practice.

Learning is connected to the Land



Ahmed weaving, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022

Jerry remarked during our final gathering in 2022, "Activities like this cut across all subjects. They are not just theory. Right now, the students are sleeping." He had drawn my attention to one of his own students, Ahmed, who was sitting in the window, engrossed in the activity while we visited his classroom. He said that "the boy doesn't usually even look up in class. He has a hard time with academics. I am so happy to see him learning today. He is not sleeping" (Jerry Tsito, 2022).



Plant material added by Ahmed to the class loom, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022

Ahmed was also very excited to try the larger loom and made the suggestion that there was a plant he knew of outside that would be soft enough to add to the yarn. With Jerry's permission, he went outside to get the plant and they worked together to add it to the loom.

Soon after I left Banda, Jerry sent me a picture of some baskets. He said in his message that the discussion of local plant knowledge as well as the students' engagement in our weaving project inspired him to try some more local weaving. He reached out to community members to help him plan and create palm frond baskets.



Baskets made by Jerry Tsito, photo credit Jerry Tsito, Ghana, 2022

Jerry's students were not only learning about the craft and the art of weaving but they are also developing a deeper understanding of the science of local materials. They are contributing to the community of knowledge.

"Conversations about the past are like sparks - they light new fires of possibilities" (Ann Stahl, 2022).

The discussion of local plants extended to Sabiye as well during our discussions about mat weaving. Owusu Alexander had explained while he was harvesting raffia that you only take what you need when you harvest and you need to move to new areas so that the plants have the chance to regrow.

One of the community members asked the us during our visit - *Could we plant a stand of raffia at schools so that students would have the materials for hands-on learning as well as learn about farming and harvesting?*

By including hands-on learning experiences in schools, youth in Ghana can not only learn their own cultural heritage and a hands-on skill, they can also better understand the value of taking care of the land.



Owusu Alexander explaining sustainable harvesting, Sabiye, Ghana, 2022

Like my small Indigenous plant garden in Victoria (Glass Beads chapter), planting, growing, and harvesting help students build a deeper connection to their environment as well as teach embodied understandings of sustainability.



Strawberry plant, Victoria, Canada, 2022

In Victoria, one of my students who was in my class for both her grade 7 & 8 years, took on the responsibility of caring for the native strawberry plants in our garden. She started to refer to them as her plant babies. Now, her section of the garden is thriving. The strawberries planted at the same time in a different bed have not done as well. We can teach students the theory of respectful harvesting and environmental sustainability but only when they have the chance to feel the plants and dig in the dirt do they truly understand the land.

Slow pedagogy

Shannon Leddy and Lorrie Miller (2024) weave Indigenous principles of learning with the idea of *slow pedagogy*. Learning takes time and patience that is not always given in a colonial school system. We need to develop school spaces that allow us to do work like weaving that takes time that exceeds a disciplinary block schedule. The problem-solving and perseverance that is learned by working at a skill over a long period of time cannot be replicated when learning is reduced to bite-sized pieces such as discrete subject units and worksheets.

In both the classrooms in Ghana and in Canada, students wanted to know what they needed to do if they made a mistake.



Jerry Tsito helping a student fix a mistake in his weaving, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022

When you are weaving, the only way to fix a hole is to undo your work and start again from the error. This slow process is difficult for students who have learned to equate *smart* with *quick*. Once students embrace the notion that making and unmaking mistakes are equal parts of learning, they find new patience with themselves as learners (Allison Balabuch & Bako Rasoarifetra, 2023).



Jerry's pressure to only be able to teach local knowledge for 2 hours per week, the pressure of standardized examinations that are set by authorities outside a classroom, and the silos and block systems of separate subjects are only a few colonial constructs that hamper slow, experiential or embodied learning.

> “For learning to have real value, it must connect to our students’ lives and lived experiences, rooted in real-world skills and considerations. (Shannon Leddy & Lorrie Miller, 2024, p. 61).

One of the concerns in Ghanaian education over the past century has been ‘school leavers’: students who finish in the colonial school system and are not destined for university but also have no practical knowledge or skills to find productive occupations as adults. During the 1960s -1990s, courses and time were added to the curriculum to provide vocational training (Francis Agbodeka, 2003). It was during one of these rounds of the inclusion practical learning in public school that Owusu Alexander first learned to weave.



In 2020, the Ghanaian government released a new curriculum that once again centers the purpose of teaching and learning around knowledge and skills that can be used both inside and out of schools. Even with a philosophical underpinning that values hands-on and vocational skills, the new curriculum continues to value assessment through testing content and separate subject silos (NACCA, 2025).

In Victoria, Canada I have seen renewed efforts through district initiatives for students to explore practical skills at the secondary school level (grades 10-12). Many apprenticeships such as cooking, carpentry, and hair dressing can be started before finishing high school. The curriculum from Kindergarten to grade 9 in Canada, however, continues to contend with the same philosophical struggles as Ghana. The push to be ‘competitive’ or ‘ready’ for the next level of schooling puts pressure on teachers to continue to value content retention over skill development. Time is scarce and teachers feel the pressure to use it to accomplish colonial tasks, relegating longer, embodied learning projects to the back burner.

Looking Forward

What can we learn from communities, schools, and museums in Ghana to decolonize education globally?

Marie Battiste (2000) reminds us that the most effective and ongoing tool of colonization was not military or political in nature but instead this system of education that strips value from existing Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing.

The journey to document, learn, and teach traditional weaving practices in Ghana and Canada highlighted for me the crucial importance of incorporating Indigenous models of learning to decolonize modern schooling. Weaving, as an embodied, hands-on activity, serves as a powerful demonstration of this approach as it fosters first order experiences and builds relational communities of practice through *Kamúcwkalha* – the feeling of group attunement and *A7xekcal* – valuing and sharing our collective expertise.



Students during weaving workshop at the Catholic School, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022

To implement authentic change, education must move beyond the colonial banking model. This requires systemic reform to dismantle the separate silos of academic disciplines and allow time for slow pedagogy. Hands-on practices like weaving are inherently interdisciplinary, connecting students to local history, science, and mathematics while building embodied understandings of sustainability and providing practical, real-world skills. By grounding learning in the land, we can begin to decolonize public education systems and help students develop the skills and knowledge needed both inside and outside the classroom.

Chapter Five: Potting



Mole National Park, Ghana



Pottery display, Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, Ghana, 2023

Potting

Does what we teach matter?

The importance of including local and Indigenous knowledge in schools and museums.

The need for ways to decolonize education globally extends beyond pedagogy and physical spaces. We also need to look at the content we are teaching students. Are we teaching students to value the local and Indigenous knowledge that is rooted in the land and their ancestors? Or are we maintaining a body of knowledge that overvalues western and Eurocentric histories and worldviews?

What can we learn from communities, schools, and museums in Ghana to decolonize education globally?

During my research journeys in Ghana and at home in Canada, I encountered many knowledge keepers and educators who are trying to highlight the importance of Indigenous and local knowledge systems in schools and museums. I draw on these encounters in this chapter:

Djangmuh Florence Kumuki, Doryumu, Ghana - a traditional pottery from the Shai region of Ghana shared her craft with me.

Museum of Natural & Cultural Heritage at Shai, Ghana - Dr. William Gblerkpor explains his vision of a field school and community and school learning space

Junior High Schools, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana and Victoria, Canada - I also draw on my experiences working with students in both countries.

The story of pots



A wave of school uniforms flooded into the Museum of Natural & Cultural Heritage at Shai, their youthful energy buzzing through the gallery.

School visit to the Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage (MNCH) at Shai, 2023

They crowded around displays of animal skulls and skins in front of a colourful backdrop of wildlife photography highlighting the beauty and diversity of Ghana...

Yet the small exhibit of traditional local pottery remained virtually ignored, its history whispering silently from behind the glass.





My workspace at the board table in The Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, 2023

During my second visit to Ghana in 2023, I set myself up to use the educational space as William Gblerkpor intended - as a field school. I did my work at the boardroom table that is central to the three gallery areas in the museum while groups of tourists and bus loads of school children came through. It allowed me to see how visitors interacted with the space, what interested them, and what they walked past. People would stop and ask me about my work and, without fail, I would be asked to talk to the vast groups of school children during their visits.

One of these waves of children happened the day after I had gone to interview a local potter, Djangmuh Florence Kumuki (Florence). The students were fascinated by the animal skulls and skins in the museum displays but they all walked past the pottery display without a backward glance.



Wall of skins, Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, 2023

While these students were captivated by the hands-on archaeology display, they unknowingly bypassed an exhibit that held centuries of cultural heritage and tradition: the unassuming display of Ghanaian pottery.



Hands-on archaeology display, Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, 2023



Pottery display, Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, 2023

On a glass fronted display case containing historic examples of Ghanaian pottery sits a small pile of pottery and tools: stones, seed pods, and a tiny hand carved wooden hand.



William Gblerkpor explained that a local potter had came to give demonstrations at the museum. She left not only her examples but also these tools so that museum visitors could see both process and product of traditional potting.

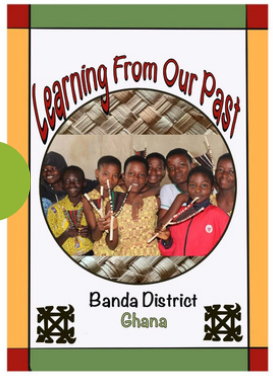


Djangmuh Florence Kumuki (Florence) demonstrating potting at Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, Photo credit: William Gblerkpor

"The space here provides a unique place. And as you have noticed, the dying traditions of ceramic, local ceramic making, potting, glass beads. We are able to bring them back here to come and demonstrate, do experimental archaeology, ethnographic work. For us, this is the spirit of helping the community also benefit from the ancestral ground that has been given to the nation. So these are some of the ideas that we have for the spaces available."
William Gblerkpor

I was interested in the pottery display especially after being immersed in my research about Banda area pottery for the school resource *Learning From our Past*. Without the presence of William or the potter, and lacking the narrative context provided in resources like *Learning From Our Past*, the pottery stood mute, unable to convey its rich history and cultural significance to the students passing by.

Link



The pottery objects on display at Shai were in severe lack of a storyteller.

Placing objects in a museum is an act of power. Ivan Karp (1991) asks us to consider whether museum exhibits are a place to display objects or a place to tell stories? As a teacher, I couldn't stand seeing all the young people walk straight past the display without a backward glance.





Sharing what I had learned from Florence and William about the pottery display with visiting school students, MNCH at Shai, 2023, Photo taken by accompanying teacher.

I drew some students in to ask what they knew about the pots. Some recognized familiar shapes from home and others shrugged their shoulders with the disinterest that only teens can express in one physical gesture. I started to explain what I had learned before about the techniques, the history, and the importance of potting in the area. I soon drew a crowd. Five students became 20 as I tried to give voice to the pots.

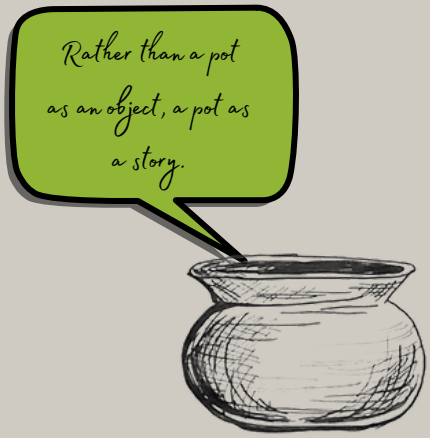
The teachers asked if I would address the whole group of 150 students and give a short talk. I wondered what to say that would resonate with as many students as possible in a very short time. I felt especially conscious of the weight of responsibility of this task as an outsider to not only Ghana, but the Shai community, and of course to the pots. I settled on trying to do justice by retelling one of the stories that Florence had shared with me during our interview about the importance of patience and care in all the work we do.



School visit photos taken by the accompanying teacher, 2023



School visit photos taken by the accompanying teacher, 2023



William's story about Florence the potter as well as his stories about the history of potting in the area had been the stories that had sparked my second visit to Shai and Ghana.

These stories, in turn, sparked William arranging for me to interview Florence, the local potter who had come to do community demonstrations at the museum, about her craft.

Of the many things I learned from Florence, her story about the importance of slow craftsmanship and pedagogy resonated with what I had noticed about the youth I teach. Most of my students in Canada rarely engage in activities that require patience and perseverance over time. If the skill can't be mastered to an acceptable level quickly, tasks and projects are often abandoned. Here is the story I learned from Florence:

Florence's story about slow craftsmanship

While Florence shared her knowledge of potting, a few local women sat around in the shade of the courtyard to watch and to contribute to the conversation. They raised the problem of buying more and more poor quality pots at market. You can buy a grinding bowl or a pot and it will last only 1 or 2 weeks before the black colour or the pattern wears off or the pot cracks from use.



Djangmuh Florence Kumuki, local potter, Doryumu, Ghana, 2023



Djangmuh Florence Kumuki, local potter, Doryumu, Ghana, 2023

Florence explained that this is due to a lack of patience and care on the part of the potter. Traditional pottery-making embodies the concept of slow craftsmanship, where patience is paramount. The process of preparing the clay alone can take several days, involving fermentation and kneading. This slow and deliberate approach is essential for achieving the desired quality and durability of the clay. Quality takes time and rushing the process to produce more pots to sell can compromise the outcome.

Once the pot is formed, it needs to be dried slowly. If a pot is dried too quickly in the hot sun, it can become brittle and break after only one or two uses. The clay needs time to dry evenly and completely. When the clay is exposed to heat too quickly, the outer layer dries faster than the inner layer, causing stress and ultimately, cracks.



Djangmuh Florence Kumuki demonstrating the technique for decorating grinding bowls. The marks inside help more efficiently grind peppers, Doryumu, 2023.

Potters may rush these processes so that they have more goods to sell at the market but it will not benefit them in the long run as people will not trust the quality of their pots.



Clay griding bowl/men's eating bowl, 1986, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, BTT 17-16858



Clay grinding bowls drying, Bondakile, 1982, BTT 17-16837

Like the slow process of weaving (See Weaving chapter), we can learn from traditional potting practices to take our time and practice patience and care in all of our work.

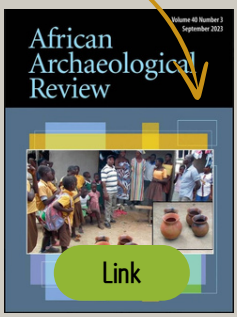
Intergenerational transmission of knowledge

Many of Florence's thoughts on the importance of patience and care when learning to pot echoed what I had learned from Bula Wayessa during our consultation meetings and his article, *My Meals Are in the Pots: Making Pots and Meals in Wollega, Southwest Ethiopia* for the 2023 Special Edition of *African Archaeological Review* - **Archaeology in Support of School Learning.**



An adult Oromo potter gives hands-on pottery-making instruction to her young daughter, Ethiopia, Photo credit: Bula Wayessa, 2023, p. 522



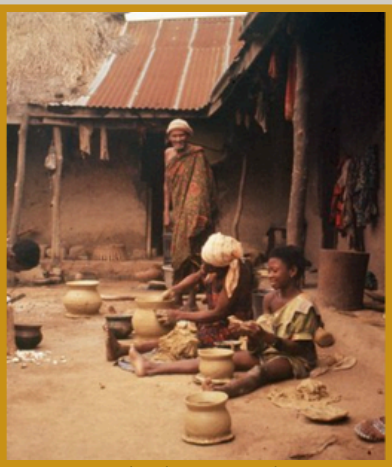


Although Florence comes from Ghana and Bula Wayessa's work is focused in Ethiopia, There are many similarities between the traditional teachings of potting.

They both talk about the intergenerational importance of pottery. Traditional pottery practices are passed down through generations, creating a continuous lineage of knowledge and skill. Mothers teach their daughters from a young age, fostering deep connections to their families, their heritage, and the land.

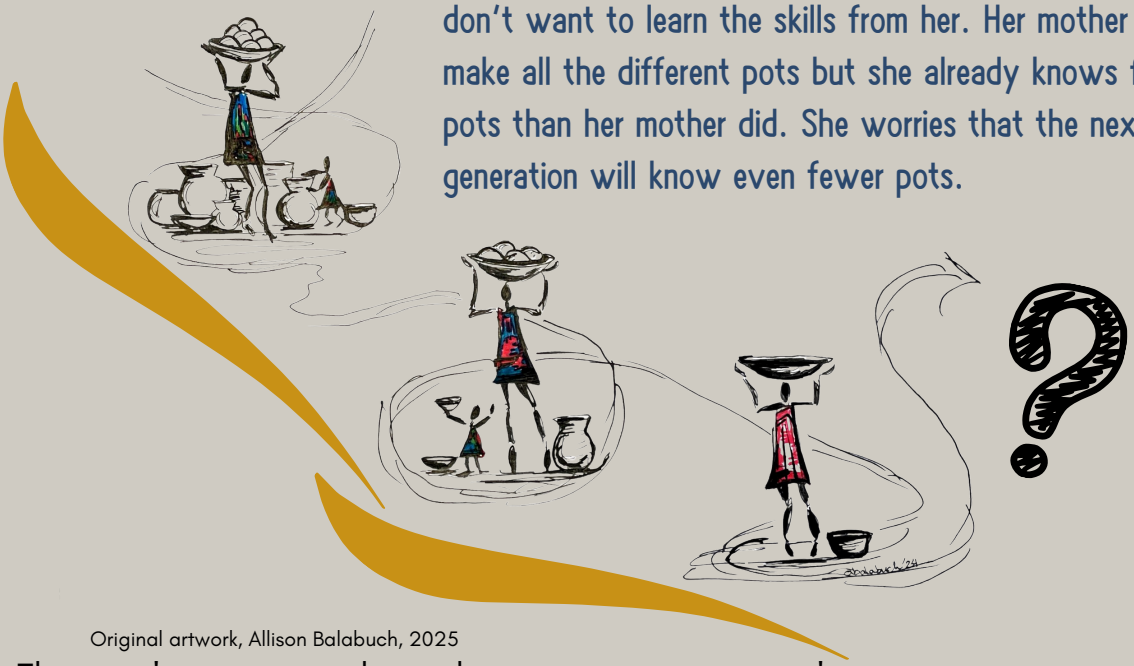
Florence explained that potting is not only learned but is inherited from grandmothers to mothers to daughters in the family.

This intergenerational transmission of knowledge ensures the preservation of cultural traditions and emphasizes the value of learning from elders and past generations.



Learning to make clay pots, Dorbour, Ghana, 1994, BTT 17-16877

Florence expressed her sadness that many young women don't want to learn the skills from her. Her mother could make all the different pots but she already knows fewer pots than her mother did. She worries that the next generation will know even fewer pots.



Original artwork, Allison Balabuch, 2025

Florence's concerns about the younger generation's waning interest in pottery hinted at a broader concern: the potential loss of cultural heritage if these traditions are not passed on.

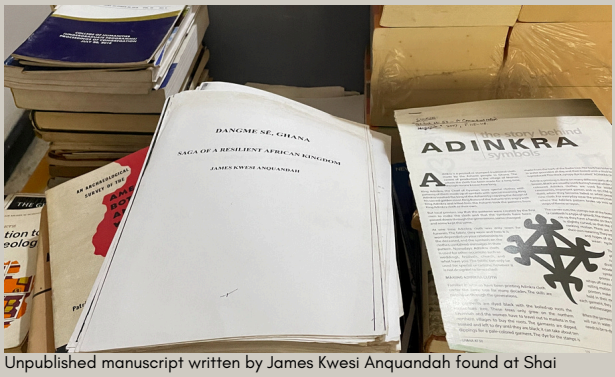
A long history of potting in Ghana



William pointing out pottery sherds at Shai along the walking path, 2022

As you walk around the land that is now the Shai Hills Resource Reserve, pottery sherds are everywhere. They remain as a record of the long local history of the Shai people.

According to James Kwesi Anquandah (unpublished manuscript), the earliest evidence of pottery production in Ghana is from around 3000 BCE from the Gao Lagoon. Pottery has been around for a long time but the potters of Shai were well known experts across millenia.



Unpublished manuscript written by James Kwesi Anquandah found at Shai Museum's library, 2023

The role of education

Opportunities created at sites such as the Museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai for potters such as Florence to share their knowledge helps to lift the value of learning heritage skills. For the students walking past the pottery, it is not enough for the objects to simply be on display. Helen Graham and Jo Vergust (2019) ask us to think of heritage beyond objects such as pots and to consider heritage as action rather than a static study of material culture. Heritage also can be understood through the **know-do-understand** model of learning.

"Associating heritage with the present might feel counter-intuitive, and yet the ways in which heritage opens onto questions of past, present and future have proved to be both powerful and useful"
(Helen Graham and Jo Vergust, 2019, p. 1)



National Museum of Ghana, Accra, Ghana, 2022

They emphasize that heritage is not just about understanding the past but about using that understanding to create meaningful change in the present and shape future possibilities.

During the school visit to Shai, I met Prince, one of the accompanying school teachers. He said that he wished there were educational resources for him to use with his students in the classroom before and after a visit to museums. He said that if there had been something to better prepare the students, they might have been more interested in the potting displays at Shai. It would give him ideas of how to build onto the heritage knowledge back in his classroom.

What if schools, museums, and community knowledge keepers worked together?

Like the communities that surround Shai Hills, women in the Banda region of Ghana also traditionally made pots. Marla C. Berns observed during her time in the village of Bonakire that, even in 1979, all women were engaged in potting. Like the women of Shai, the knowledge was passed down from grandmother to mother to daughter but it was also taught in village schools.



Berns, 2007, p.86

1 Young school girls learning how to make small bowls in a weekly crafts class.

This historical richness, however, seemed conspicuously absent from students' existing knowledge base, prompting me to wonder:

If potting has such a long history across the country for centuries, why weren't students more interested in the pottery displays?

- Why was Florence struggling to find young people who want to learn the craft?
- If potting was taught in schools as recently as 1979, what has happened in education since?

Women's work

Potting in many parts of Africa has traditionally been - and continues to be - women's work. Barbara E. Frank (2021) describes the process of clay mining as both a skilled but dangerous endeavor as good quality clay is found deeper in the ground.



Potting clay source, Bondakile, 1982, BTT 17-17214



Potting clay stored outside a house, Dorbour, 1994, BTT 17-16912



Mixing potting clay, Dorbour, 1994, BTT 17-16913

The heavy containers of clay are then transported to the potters' workshops to be processed before the pot making begins. Although men are involved in the process of mining clay in some areas, they have often been relatives of the female potters.

Women's work is often undervalued in society under colonial patriarchal constructs and has been greatly impacted by monetization of the economy in Africa.

Across the globe, preparing food is seen as simply a necessary domestic task and potting is relegated to the category of craft rather than treated as a serious occupation.

crossover skill development

Amanda Logan and M. Dores Cruz (2021) describe how these often gendered tasks are intrinsically linked in the Banda region of Ghana. Crossover skill development occurs when two tasks teach a similar set of skills and knowledge. For example, the same techniques for preparing and pounding clay are echoed in the pounding of yams to make the local dish fufu.



Women pounding yam fufu, New Yam Festival, Ahenkro, GHana, 1982, BTT 17-16790



Pounding clay, Ghana, Logan & Cruz, 2014, p.219

Bula Wayessa (2023) describes a similar phenomenon in Ethiopia where women prepare and ferment grains and clay using similar techniques.

Through these traditions, women pass on a wider scope of knowledge such as nutrition, food security, and pateience to their young apprentices through oral storytelling, songs, and puzzles.

Traditional open air courtyards house both tasks with younger women learning from their elders how to both cook and pot.

In Ghana, due to the impacts of both globalization and colonialism, the need for men to go further to farm or to work outside the community means less family support for mining clay. In the village of Dorbour, in the Banda area, male relatives traditionally dug the clay for potters. Because of the monetization of the economy, women sometimes need to depend on purchasing clay from men where there is a taboo on women entering the pits.



Large clay pit west of Bui Village, 1989, BTT 17-17526



A woman sitting on the edge of a clay-mining site in Enango, Ethiopia, using a hoe to mine clay, Bula Wayessa, 2023, p. 521.

Commodification of land and the spread of monetized market economies have a direct impact on women across the continent. In Ethiopia, Oromo potters had free access to their mining sites as land was not owned individually but seen as a sacred gift from nature. Recently, communal land is being distributed to local male farmers who then charge women for clay mining rights.

Potting - from mining, to processing, to building, to firing, to selling - is women's work.



Young women carry headpans loaded with blackened clay bowls as they head to market, Adadiem, 1994, BTT 17-16905

Bula Wayessa (2023) draws our attention to the importance of this statement: it is not only traditional knowledge that is in danger but specifically women's knowledge. Potting provides women with the skills to both make the vessels necessary for their own families and communities but also products to sell at market. The income allows women financial independence.

Selling pots at markets also facilitates women to build wider social networks, meet with friends, and expand their commerce across rural areas. This community approach to potting is not only found at the markets.



Women heading to market, Dorbour, Ghana, 1994, BTT 17-16879



Bonfire firing of clay pots, Adadiem, Ghana, 1994, BTT 17-16890

In Doruyumu, Florence described how she and other local potters also work together to pool their individual work and resources at community firing locations. Without combining their work, they would not be able to afford to continue the tradition of potting.

For women, potting is more than just pots.

Environmental sustainability

Potting is a tradition that comes from the land and has built in environmental sustainability. The replacement of many ceramic pots with plastic containers and metal is not only less sustainable for the environment but also contributes to growing garbage problems in Africa.



A young girl crushes damaged pottery on a stone to make temper that will be added to the raw clay, Bula Wayessa, 2023, p. 525

Both Florence and Bula Wayessa talk about the built-in recycling process of potting where broken pots are crushed to be readded to clay as temper.

Bula Wayessa explains that, "the Oromo potters [of Ethiopia] have been practicing recycling for generations, and that skill is passed on through their learning network. They recycle pots damaged during firing and drying or while in use. They grind the materials and convert them into a temper widely used in pottery production" (p.527).

Like Cedi using broken beads and used glass bottles to create new glass beads, nothing needs to be wasted. Everything has its use - and reuse - that is sustainability.



Crushed glass bottles become reforged into new glass beads, Ghana, 2023

Teaching potting in schools

In 2022, I took the draft school resource, *Learning from our Past*, to Junior Secondary School classes in Banda-Ahenkro to get input on the resource from students and their teachers. The students were very interested in the resource as it reflected the local peoples, places, and objects that made up their everyday lives. They were particularly interested in the pages on potting.



Students and teacher at the Model School for Girls looking at the draft resource Learning From our Past, Banda-Ahenkro, 2022

They talked about the pots that they used at home, especially those that had not been replaced by plastic or metal substitutes such as large water storage pots or the flat black grinding dishes.

They explained that some medicines must be prepared and stored in pots like those found in the book.



Clay water-cooling pots, Ahenkro, 1986, BTT 17-16861



clay grinding bowl/men's eating bowl, Dorbour, 1994, BTT 17-16891

They also commented that the topic of pottery had never been included in their schooling.

Jerry Tsito, a teacher in Banda-Ahenkro and my host during my school visits, is working to change what is taught in local schools. He obtained permission from the local school commission to teach local knowledge and heritage on Fridays as a starting point to reintroduce Indigenous Knowledge Systems in local schools.



900 copies of Learning from our Past delivered to Banda area schools in December, 2023, Photo credit: Snyda Mensah



Both traditional knowledge information pages and hands-on learning activities in *Learning from our Past, 2023*

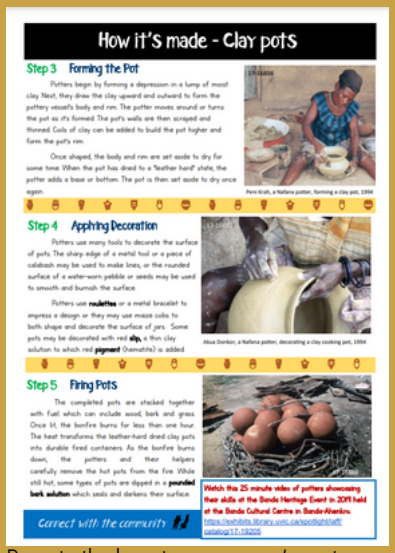
In collaboration with other Junior High School teachers, he plans to use the print resource in combination with hands-on learning activities to bring back topics like weaving and pottery into the classroom. He felt that it would not only help students value their ancestral knowledge systems but it would also teach practical skills that they could develop into future career opportunities.

Like Bula Wayessa, Jerry Tsito can see the current and future importance of young people learning skills such as potting.

The transformative power of integrating traditional knowledge, particularly through tangible examples like pottery, became strikingly evident in the days following my classroom visit.

After my visit to their classrooms, one of the classroom teachers told me that later that same week, two students came into her class in the morning with large handfuls of clay. They explained that they had seen all the pottery in the book and they also knew where to get clay.

If the pottery was in the book...



Page in the learning resource *Learning From our Past*, 2023

...and they had the material...





Students from the Model Girls School, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022

... could they learn to make a pot?

The teacher said, "No one was forcing them to learn like we are forcing them to do [in school]. They will just do it themselves." The inclusion of traditional knowledge in the resource presented at school had already shifted their perception of the value of potting.

Rather than relegating this learning to isolated events at the local community level, the inclusion of topics like potting in the classroom will expand student access to local traditional knowledge and deepen the perceived value of this knowledge.

This simple act of curiosity, sparked by the inclusion of pottery in their learning environment, speaks volumes about the potential of traditional crafts to not only preserve past cultural heritage but to build a stronger present and future for the next generations.

Looking forward



Junior High School students learning about pottery making, Bnada-Ahenkro, 2019, BTT 17-19898

From student and teacher focus group consultations conducted in 2019 to the book launch in 2023 - resource development takes a village.

By embracing traditional practices like pottery, communities can re-embrace the value of their heritage, ensuring its transmission to future generations. The goal is not to return to the past but to draw lessons from traditional knowledge systems to problem solve and to forge a more sustainable future rooted in their unique cultural heritage.



Jerry Tsito and students learning weaving techniques, Banda-Ahenkro, 2022



Florence demonstrating potting techniques at the museum in Shai, Photo credit: William Gblerkpor

Like Florence's demonstrations at the museum at Shai, the inclusion of traditional technologies in colonial educational systems such as schools and museums has the power to shift what is recognized and valued as 'real learning'. For many women, potting can also be a solution to economic independence. Florence's lament that 'many young women don't want to learn the skills from her' underscores the urgency of incorporating traditional crafts into education systems.

By incorporating these practices into educational settings, we can bridge the gap between historical significance and contemporary understanding, ensuring that future generations inherit not just a sustainable future, but a vibrant cultural legacy and ongoing learning.



Florence demonstrating traditional potting tools, Doryumu, Ghana, 2023

Pottery making can instill an appreciation for resourcefulness and responsible consumption. By engaging with a craft deeply connected to the earth, young people can develop a greater understanding of environmental interconnectedness.



Roadside pottery stand, Ghana, 2022

By recognizing the interconnectedness of cultural heritage, education, and sustainability, we can empower future generations to become stewards of both their cultural legacy and the environment.

Chapter Six: Fish traps



Shai Hills, Ghana



Fish traps

Whose voices matter?

Decolonizing education through the co-creation of educational resources

The decolonization of education globally includes pedagogical and content changes, and a re-examination of what is considered an educational space, however, in order to make these shifts, we also need resources that reflect these changes.

What can we learn from communities, schools, and museums in Ghana to decolonize education globally?

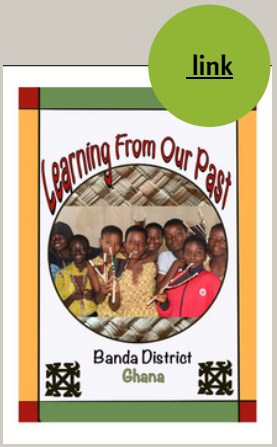
Through my research, another question emerged:

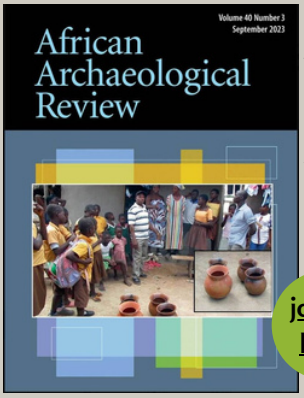
How can research and the co-creation of learning resources represent multiple voices and worldviews while resisting extractive or tokenistic relationships - particularly across contexts shaped by colonial legacies?

I draw on the following encounters in this chapter:

My work with Dr. Ann Stahl, teacher Jerry Tsito, and community consultations in Banda to create the resource *Learning from our Past* funded by a Partnership Development Project through the Canadian Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC): *Improving African Futures using Lessons from the Past* (IAfF). This project also supported to the digital repository Banda Through Time - an incidental archive of photos generated by comings and goings as conversation prompts and a source for enriching metadata. This is a repository of archival materials from researchers associated with the long-term Banda Research Project (1982-2014) as well as the community-based Banda Heritage Initiative.

link





journa
l link

My collaboration as an educational consultant, co-editor, and co-author on the special 40th edition of African Archaeological Review - Archaeology for Education funded by a SSHRC Connection grant.

My learning from knowledge keepers and fishermen Maxwell Gbadago, Dzobo Reuben, and Dzobo Sebastian who shared their knowledge of traditional fish trap making as well as the impact of the construction of the Bui Dam, Akanyakrom, Ghana. The project was funded by an Endangered Material Knowledge Programme (EMKP) grant from the British Museum.

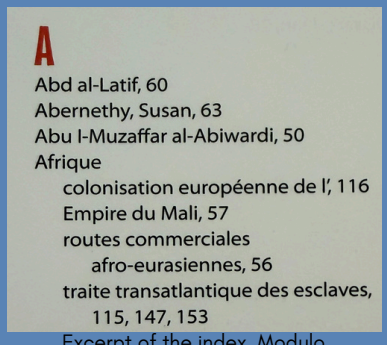


Dzobo Reuben (left) and Maxwell Gbadago (right), Akanyakrom, Ghana, 2022

Learning Resources

As a teacher in French Immersion, I have spent my career creating educational resources. At the beginning of my career, my efforts were primarily driven by a lack of anything in French at the appropriate grade level. As I have been decolonizing my practice, the need to create my own resources also comes from a lack of texts that reflect multiple voices and worldviews. There are limited resources that include Indigenous knowledge for my local context of Victoria, Canada. There are also few that include anywhere in the entire continent of Africa.

The majority of resources that are available about Africa are limited to colonial narratives that focus on deficits such as war, disease, and famine. The updated Sciences-Humaines (Social Studies) textbook for grade 8 published by Modulo (2023) includes 6 pages about the whole continent and those pages are almost entirely focused on either European or Arabic traders' perspectives of Africa - with the exception of a text box about the Mali Empire. (There are 7 pages about Catholicism.)



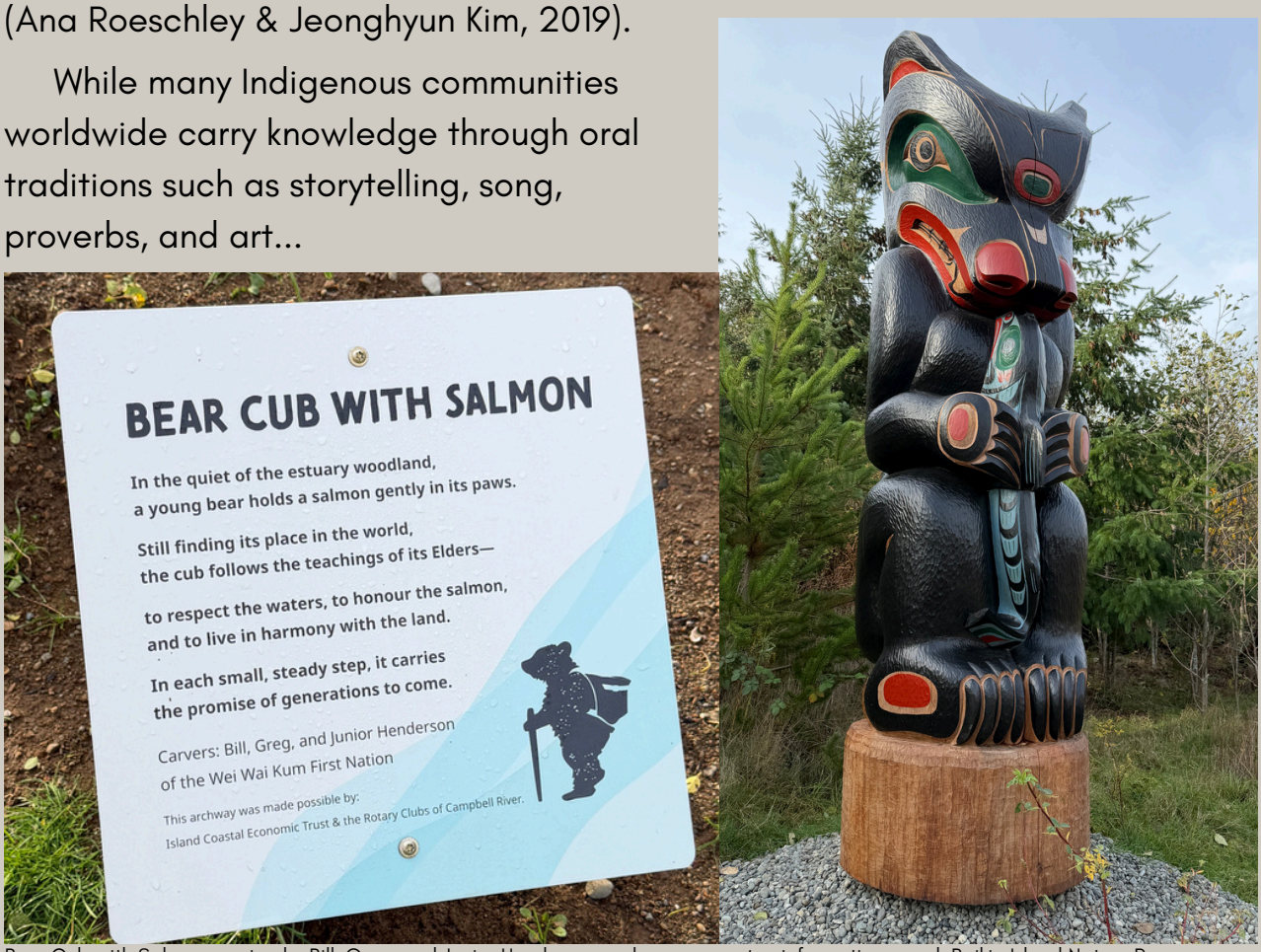
A

Abd al-Latif, 60
Abernethy, Susan, 63
Abu l-Muzaffar al-Abiwardi, 50
Afrique
colonisation européenne de l', 116
Empire du Mali, 57
routes commerciales
afro-eurasiennes, 56
traite transatlantique des esclaves, 115, 147, 153

Excerpt of the index, Modulo Sciences-Humaines 8, 2023, px.

Memory, story, and relationships not only form the heart of community, they help form, understand and share their collective history and heritage. Records, both oral and written, as well as archives are also 'members' of the community. These repositories of knowledge can either reflect a community respectfully and accurately or they can (and have) been used to perpetuate a particular narrative of that community controlled by those in power - either colonial or otherwise (Ana Roeschley & Jeonghyun Kim, 2019).

While many Indigenous communities worldwide carry knowledge through oral traditions such as storytelling, song, proverbs, and art...



Bear Cub with Salmon carving by Bill, Greg, and Junior Henderson and accompanying information panel, Baikie Island Nature Reserve, Campbell River, Canada, 2025.

... other cultures 'wrote things down' and, eventually, took photos to document what they perceived as truth and fact.

Text-based archives are therefore rife with racism and one-sided views of history and heritage that have been used to continue the colonial power and narratives that displace and subjugate communities (Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 2015).

So where do school textbooks come into this story?

Whose voices get to be in a textbook?

Textbook troubles

When you look in a textbook, do you see yourself or your community reflected on the pages? Do the faces and places resonate with your life experiences?

From grade 5-12, I was a student in the French Immersion program in British Columbia where my Social Studies (History, Geography, etc.) textbooks came from the province of Quebec.

I use the term textbook to describe the books that are written for schools, either required or optional, purchased in multiples and often serve as the base of a course or subject area.





This was practicality - the textbooks written in French in Canada came from Quebec. Even though I was separated from Quebec by close to 5000 kilometers and a ferry boat ride - that was where my textbooks were focused. I never learned anything about the history of my own area - colonial or Indigenous.

I didn't realize growing up that I was missing anything - the book said this was what constituted the important history about Canada - The development of la Nouvelle France and an odd chapter about Louis Riel in Manitoba (The traitor - not the hero narrative).

The question is - Why does it matter who is in a book?

My first answers to this question came when I was teaching grade 3/4 when I first moved to Victoria. The curriculum for these grades is centred around local history and my first thought was - oh, no... how boring!

My educational experience across K-12 education and University was that nothing interesting ever happened in Canada.

Interesting history was located in palaces in Europe...



Louvre Museum, Paris, France, 2008

...and pyramids in Egypt...



Giza Pyramids, Cairo, Egypt, 2012

...not Vancouver Island.



Botanical Beach, Vancouver Island, Canada, 2016

As I started to research more about local history, there were many moments that glowed:

Local history is rich and stretches back to time immemorial.

Learning resources about local history, that are at an age-appropriate level, are difficult to find in English and close to impossible in French.

Local voices are almost entirely absent in the books available to me as a teacher.

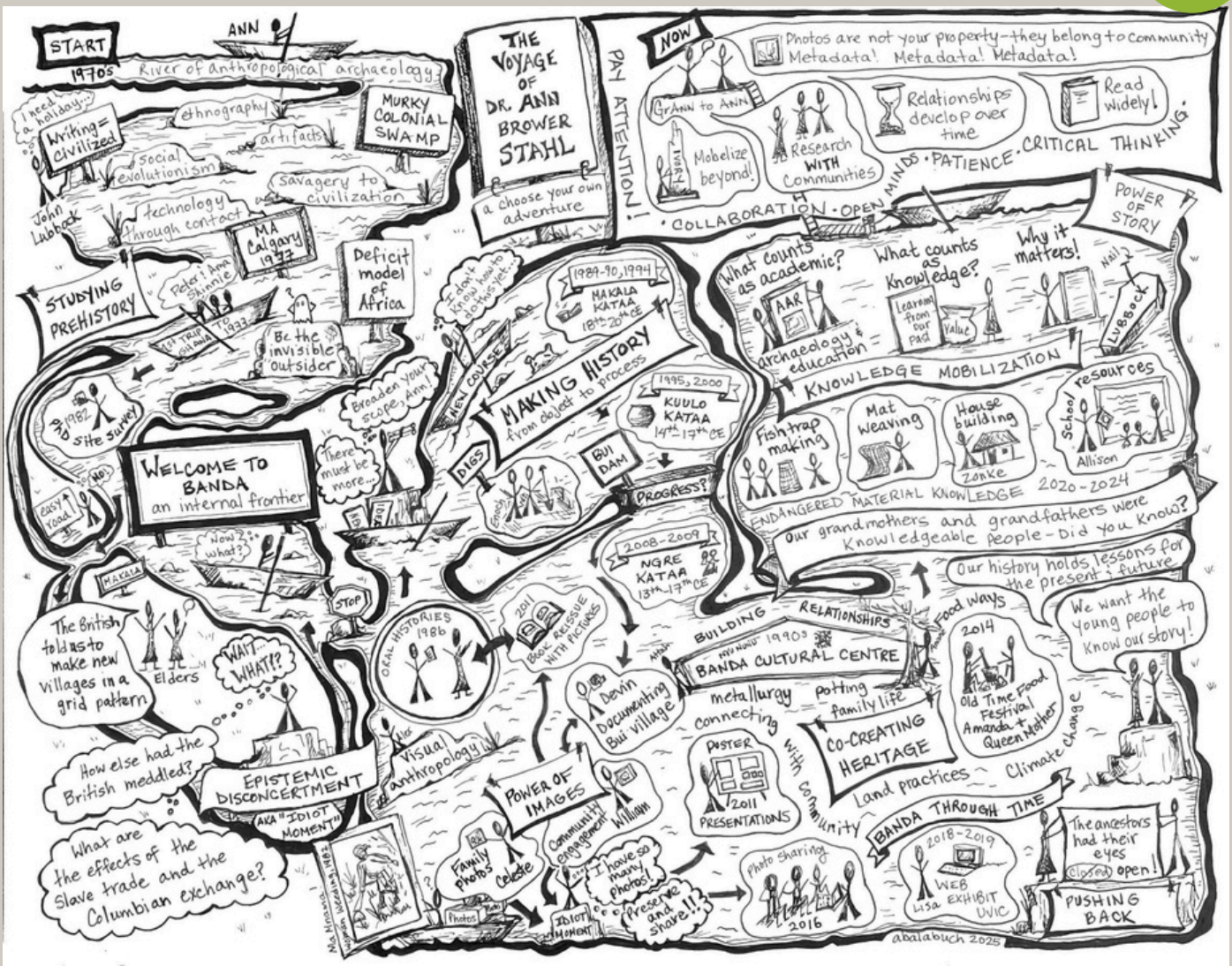
These experiences of trying to find, and then almost without fail, having to create resources, is one of the reasons Ann Stahl and the project in Banda glowed… this sounded interesting to me as an educator and a researcher.

The voyage of Ann Stahl

In 2021, Ann Stahl, from the department of Anthropology at the University of Victoria, approached Kathy Sanford from the department of Curriculum and Instruction looking for a grad student to work on a project to help co-create school resources for a rural community in Ghana. Ann had been doing her work in the community for 40 years and it had grown from studying prehistory (more like the textbooks I had in school), to "making history" to later co-creating heritage with communities.

From "Studying Prehistory" to "Making History" to "Co-creating Heritage": Reflections on a Journey, Ann Stahl, 2025

link



Original Artwork by Allison Balabuch, published in Ann Stahl, 2025)

Co-creating heritage with communities differs from the salvage ethnographic strategies that 'mine' communities of information with a historic gaze for the aims of tourism or heritage research (Ibrahima Thiaw & Mouhamed A. Ly, 2020).

I joined Ann's SSHRC funded project near its end - the digital repository was online, John Baoteng and Esther Astiobe had already done weeklong workshops and consultations with both youth and educators in Banda about heritage for education... What they needed now was a book.

Fish traps

Sitting under the mango trees in the relocated village of Akanyakrom, in the Banda area of Ghana, Ann Stahl and the research team began by talking with community members about the project goals of the fish trap documentation. As part of the Endangered Material Knowledge Programme (EMKP) Grant from the British museum, we were there to learn about basketry fish trap weaving. The spark of this particular project had come from a photo taken by Ann in 1982 of a similar fish trap. Since the photo was taken in 1982, the fishing villages of Akanyakrom and Agbɛjikrom have been relocated due to the construction of the Bui Dam.



Basketry fish trap used by Ewe fishermen, Agbegikrom South, 1982, BTT 17-17121

"Fishing in Banda has changed dramatically since the Bui Dam was built. Fishermen cannot use their canoes and traditional tools on the lake created by the dam. Traditional skills such as fish trap weaving are in danger of being lost" (Maxwell Gbadago, 2022).

In one generation, the techniques of fish trap weaving are already in danger as they can no longer be used in the traditional fishing practices of the Ewe people.

We were also there to consult on my draft of the learning resource. During these encounters, looking at the resource draft, talking about the fish trap documentation, and sharing meals and conversation under the mango trees - many learning events occurred. I learned new insights about what constitutes community, the importance of reciprocity in community research, and how education needs to be involved at the beginning of resource development - not as an add-on after researchers in the field, such as archaeologists, have finished their field work.

Community

When I began working on the learning resource in 2021, I had many hesitations about my place in this project. As a white woman from Canada, who had never visited the Banda community in Ghana, who was I to be writing a book about their heritage and history? I am always very conscious in Canada to look for resources for my class written by Indigenous authors about Indigenous history and heritage.

I felt like an imposter.

Ann Stahl assured me throughout the process of writing the draft that my work would be welcomed in the communities of Banda. I had the expertise to share with the project and they would embrace what I was creating.



Learning resource consultation, Akanyakrom, Ghana, July 2022. L-R xxxx, xxxx, Dzobo Reuben, Maxwell Gbadago, Dzobo Sebastien, Enoch Mensah.

It wasn't until I arrived in Banda in 2022 that I felt this warm welcome and the excitement of the communities to see the faces and places of their heritage on the pages of a book.

I learned to see community in a different way.

On our initial visit to Akanyakrom, Ann encouraged me to talk about my own experiences as a fisherwoman in Canada. From as far back as I can remember, I fished with my dad. Before we even had a boat in British Columbia, we would go out on the rocks of the breakwater in Campbell River and jig for cod. When he bought a boat, we would go for hours every weekend fishing for cod and salmon. This interest led me to work at a fishing lodge throughout my late teen years.



Me and my father, Reg Balabuch, and my tyee salmon, 1994

> But in this community in Ghana, women don't usually fish.

At first, I was met with some incredulity that I was the child who learned to fish rather than a boy child, but as I shared photos on my phone and stories about learning from my father, one of the community elders put his hand on my shoulder and nodded his head with a glowing smile. "You understand".



Left: Ann Stahl, centre: Enoch Mensah translating at Sabiye, Ghana, 2023

Through our translator, Enoch Mensah, the elder said that he was happy that I understood the importance of not losing the knowledge of fish trap making. I understood the importance of young people learning from their parents. I was included in this global community of fisher-people. It was through these learning events that I finally understood that community is not just ancestors or land-based connections - it is also a shared experience, respect, and love.

Like my experience with weaving (see Weaving chapter), my embodied knowledge of fishing and fishing culture changed the lens that I used to understand the fish trap making.

Maxwell Gbadago explained that traditionally, young boys would sit with the fish trap makers and be given small tasks to do while they listened to stories from their elders. I did the same with my father, learning to tie fishing leads to prepare for the next day out on the water. These experiences are not only about fishing but about ways of knowing and being in the world. When we began the documentation of the fish trap weaving in Akanyakrom, the local children that came by to watch did not recognize what the weavers were doing.



Two local children (back) watching Dzobo Reuben (left) and Maxwell Gbadago (right) make a fish trap, Akanyakrom, Ghana, 2022

In one generation, knowledge was already disappearing.



Front L-R: xxxx, xxxx, xxxx. Back L-R: Enoch Mensah, xxxx, xxxx, xxxx. Resource consultation, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022

My welcome in the community was not magic - it was built on Ann Stahl's 40 years of work with this community. The difficulties of community-based research are complex - trust takes time. During our meeting with the Banda Traditional Council, I was welcomed because I was walking the path that Ann had already forged through her work. I was told that I walked in the footsteps of a great woman. Ann had already established strong *relational accountability* with the Banda community.

Shawn Wilson (2008) and Bagele Chilsa (2017) both stress the importance of *relational accountability* when engaging in research with Indigenous and local communities.

> We are all accountable to all of our relations; we are in relationship with people, the land, the cosmos, and with ideas. If we define a community as a complex system of humans, plants, animals, spirits, and land, we need to be accountable to all of those members' voices and value them as equal parts of the 'community'.

There are many community involvement strategies that can help facilitate community participation, produce and disseminate knowledge, and shift perceptions of worth at all stages of the research (Dominique A. Henri, Laura M. Martinez-Lavasseur, Jennifer Provencher, Mick Appaqaq, & Magali Houde, 2022).

Ann Stahl had already followed this path from research *in* the community at the beginning of her career to research *with* the community when I joined the project in 2021. The building of the Banda Cultural Centre in 1995 as well as multiple community heritage events such as the Banda Heritage Celebration in 2011 with poster displays and demonstrations and the Olden Times Food Fair in 2014 co-organized by Dr. Amanda Logan and Banda Queen Mother Lelɛɛ Akosua Kepefu are only a few examples of how they have built this interconnected system of relational accountability, respect, and reciprocity.



Women making fuura balls for the Olden Times Food Fair, Ahenkro, Ghana, 2014, photo credit: Amanda Logan, BTT: 17 -19490

The Banda Heritage Initiative was launched locally in 2016 and is continuing to do work in the community such as the community book launch for the school resource *Learning From Our Past* in December, 2023 (Ann Stahl, 2025).

It was into this greater research and heritage community, build over time in Banda, that I was fortunate to be welcomed.



Community members in Dumpofie, Ghana, 2022, looking at the initial draft of *Learning From Our Past*

I felt this warm welcome from every community in the villages I visited with my draft resource. Members of the community would crowd around and look through the pages, giving feedback through Enoch Mensah as our translator.

I was aware through all these exchanges that my lack of language was a barrier - or a wall between us. I wished that we spoke any language in common so that I could hear their comments myself.



The People of Banda

Banda is made up of one large town and about 30 smaller settlements. It is home to people who trace their histories to several surrounding regions, some nearby, and others far away.

Unity

The groups that live in Banda have lived together over centuries. They developed ways of living alongside one another despite speaking their own languages and practicing different livelihoods, customs and religions.

For this reason, the symbol of the Banda Cultural Centre, the Banda Traditional Council and the Banda District Assembly is "Unity."

Kuulo People and Wurache

Among the groups who call Banda home are Kuulo people, also called Dumpo. According to oral tradition, their ancestress Lelɛɛ Nyini Wurache descended from the sky to the lands known today as Banda. She came together with her husband Sie Dofo, a daughter named Akosua Yeli and a horse. They established a village, but the place had no water.

Wurache set out on the horse in search of water. At a point in the bush, the horse scratched the ground and water rose to the surface. The place became known as "Obonga," which is the word for horse in the Kuulo language (Dumpo).

Kwasi Millah and Wurache tree, 1995 (17-16938)

Wurache grew to be a very old lady. One day when people were at farm, she sat on her stool holding her bowl and sank into the ground. That same day, a baobab seedling germinated on the spot, marking the place where she sank. The centuries-old tree on the outskirts of Dumpofie is sacred to Kuulo people and its fruit is never eaten.

The Kuulo people celebrated Wurache's funeral with a new form of drumming called "Lendzi," which has been played since at times of war and during the funerals for Kuulo ancestors.

Page about the Kuulo people and Wurache, *Learning From Our Past*, 2023

In the village of Dumpofie, the Kuulo people (also known as Dumpo), asked that the traditional story of Wurache be included in the book. The Kuulo people are the original inhabitants of the Banda area. According to oral tradition, their ancestress Lelɛɛ Nyini Wurache descended from the sky to the lands known today as Banda. We added this story to the book and were able to take it back to the community for approval before we left the area.

Who is in a book?

The greatest reaction by community members were to the photos - people and places that they recognized and that they could talk about.

The reflection of their community in a potential textbook for school was something new. When I met with Henewaa from the women's group, she said through Enoch Mensah, our translator, that even if she couldn't read the English language, at least if her children came home with a book like this, she could understand the content through the familiar photos.



Resource consultation with Henewaa (right). Allison Balabuch (left), Enoch Mensah (center), Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022. Photo credit Ann Stahl

It was through these consultations that it was decided that our final version of the resource would be bilingual - in English on one side and in one of the local languages, Nafaanra, translated by Samson Attah, on the other.



The students I worked with in Banda were equally excited to see familiar places and faces when they looked at the resource draft. They also wanted to know if they also would be in the final version. This is why I chose the photo of some of the students and their weaving projects for the cover.

The book is for them.

The school textbooks I saw in Ghana contained significant content from outside of Africa. The featured story in one of the Junior High School English textbooks was Oliver Twist - a story that may be a 'classic' in the minds of many English teachers; however, it has no points of connection to young people in rural Ghana. They were learning under the mango trees but reading about apple pies.



Students from the Model Girls' School give me a tour of their textbook room, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022

Carolyn Roberts (2024) prompts us as educators to "always ask: How does this story support students in learning about themselves and the society they live in?" (p.52).

In the textbooks available in their school, the connections to self, home, and community were missing.



Excerpt, *Learning From Our Past*, 2023, p. 7

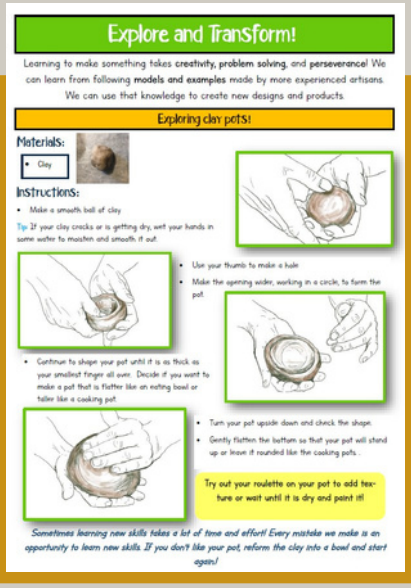
In the school resource, I tried to build in the **school-textbook-home** connections to encourage educators and youth to see formal education (school) as a piece of the bigger picture of learning in the context of student's life and their local society. In each section are thinking questions under the subheadings of "Connect with your community", "Connect with your past", "Connect with the Land", and "Making Connections" that focuses on more global connections.

Youth Voices

One voice often missing in resource creation is the voice of youth. The intended audience for a school resource is rarely consulted during its creation.
Before taking my draft to Banda, I asked my Canadian grade 8 classes to read through the pages of the school resource draft and try the activities. They gave me feedback on the reading level, the engagement level, and the images. I edited the activity pages after trying them with my students based on their questions and their resulting projects. We made clay pots, glass beads, and weaving projects as I worked through the draft resource.



Clay pots made by Canadian students, Victoria, Canada, 2021



Explore and Transform!

Learning to make something takes **creativity, problem solving**, and **perseverance**! We can learn from following **models and examples** made by more experienced artisans. We can use that knowledge to create new designs and products.

Exploring clay pots!

Materials:

- Clay

Instructions:

- Make a smooth ball of clay

Tip: If your clay cracks or is getting dry, wet your hands in some water to moisten and smooth it out.

- Use your thumb to make a hole
- Make the opening wider, working in a circle, to form the pot.
- Continue to shape your pot until it is as thick as your smallest finger all over. Decide if you want to make a pot that is flatter like an eating bowl or taller like a cooking pot.
- Turn your pot upside down and check the shape.
- Gently flatten the bottom so that your pot will stand up or leave it rounded like the cooking pots.

Try out your roulette on your pot to add texture or wait until it is dry and paint it!

Sometimes learning new skills takes a lot of time and effort! Every mistake we make is an opportunity to learn new skills. If you don't like your pot, reform the clay into a bowl and start again!

Learning From Our Past, clay pot instructions, 2023, p. 28

In Banda, students in four Junior High School classes also gave me feedback on the text as well as the weaving activity (see Weaving and Potting chapters). I learned when I was working with the students in Banda that the reading sections of the text needed to be rich in detail but at a level understandable for second language learners. Similar to creating resources for my French Immersion students in Canada, sentence structures need to be simple with clear verb structures and new vocabulary needs to be explained in image or in words so that the text can retain the richness of information with out becoming too complex for independent reading.



Students at the Methodist School reading the draft resource, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022.

I was also fortunate to acquire a volunteer personal assistant in one of the youth, known as Sister, who lived at the house where I was staying. Sister (Mary Mohammed) made it her personal mission to not only try and teach me the Nafaanra language but she read every new page of the draft as I wrote. When she got stuck on the wording of a section, we would talk about how to say it differently so that she could understand it more easily.



Sister and I. Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022, photo credit: Zonke Guddah



Sister showing me a casava plant, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022

She also took me on photography missions around the house to find the photos I needed to add to the text - plants, cooking utensils, and whatever else I needed. It was on one of these missions that she encouraged me to learn from the women in the house how to pound yams and how to cook Banku.



Sister demonstrating how to pound yams for fufu, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022

Like any embodied experiences, my subsequent book pages were richer in detail and more clearly written.

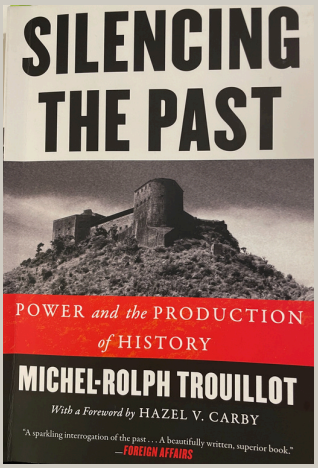


Me learning to make banku, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022, photo credit: Sister (Mary Mohammed)

Without Sister's daily assistance and feedback, the resource would not be as complete and my stay in Banda would not have been as rich. We need to involve youth in books written for youth as well as in all aspects of their learning.

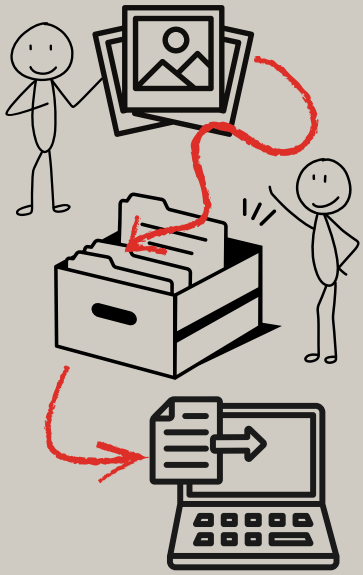
Making (re)sources

As Ann Stahl and I talked about history and heritage in Africa, we came to realize that archaeologists knew much more current information than was included in common school textbooks in either Ghana or Canada. Through our collaboration, Ann introduced me to Michel-Rolph Trouillot (1995) and his book: Silencing the Past - Power and the Production of History. Michel-Rolph Trouillot uses the example of the Haitian revolution to describe how history is not neutral. There are many points when voices are silenced:



> "Silences enter the process of historical production at four crucial moments:
> the moment of fact creation (the making of sources);
> the moment of fact assembly (the making of archives),
> the moment of fact retrieval (the making of narrative);
> and the moment of retrospective significance (the making of history in the final instance)"
> (Michel-Rolph Trouillot, 1995, p. 26).

For me and my resource, I had built the first 25 pages at stage three or four of Trouillot's list. Ann Stahl and all of the researchers, archaeologists, community members, and students had already created the sources and then had made decisions of how and what to archive in the digital repository. I was doing what many educators creating school resources do - reading what was already deemed significant and constructing the historical narratives for students. I was deciding, from what I could access, what was significant enough to be in the resource.



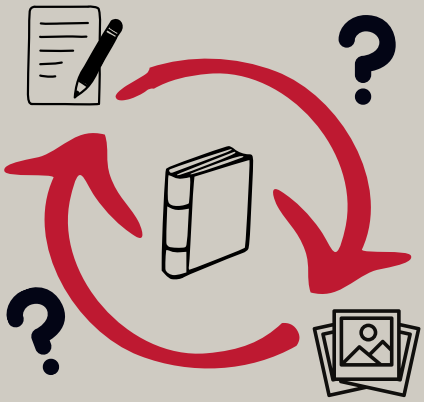
While I was in Banda in 2022, I added 25 pages to the draft resource from my consultations with schools and communities and documenting the fish trap making and the mat weaving (see Weaving chapter). These 25 pages came together with much more depth and much more ease and meaning.



Documenting raffia harvesting, Sabiye, Ghana, 2022. L-R: ALlison Balabuch, Enoch Mensah (hidden), Patrick Mensah, Ann Stahl, Owusu Alexander. Photo credit: Zonke Guddah.

Because I was there at the point of *source creation* - documentation for the EMKP grant - I could ask the questions that an educator would ask. These are not always the same questions that an archaeologist asks. When your purpose is to make something like fish trap making engaging for youth, you have different questions than if you are focused on documenting an endangered material knowledge practice.

I could also take the photos that I knew would facilitate the book and student learning. Sometimes, I wouldn't know I needed a particular photo, until I had written a section of the resource. This process of documenting, writing, questioning, and photographing was circular.



Maxwell Gbadago described traditional conservation practices through local control of catch limits and seasonal closures to protect fish stocks in the Ewe communities:

> "When we fished in this way, we only needed small tools. They weren't expensive or big – they were just enough to catch what we needed. We taught our sons how to make the tools and how to use them to provide for the community. Like this, we lived happily for as long as we can remember" (Maxwell Gbadago, 2022).

Information like this may not have made the first crucial moment of history production – *source creation*. If the disciplinary researcher is focused on the process of fish trap making and not fishing culture as a whole, the stories about family life, community of fishing, and conservation might not end up in a published academic paper.



Smoking fish in Akanyakrom, Ghana, 2022

- My own personal experience as a fisherwoman, watching the salmon stocks in Canada decline over my life time, resonated with Maxwell's messages about environmental stewardship.
- My experience smoking fish in Canada.
- My experience teaching youth about climate justice and conservation to build a stronger future for generations to come.



My positionality as an educator and fisherwoman shifted what I thought was significant to include in an educational resource.

Understanding

Although I had been able to write the first 25 pages of the school resource using the Banda Through Time exhibit before visiting Ghana in 2022, I had many questions along the way. Ann Stahl would send me articles and make suggestions of what to read to deepen my understanding of archaeology, Africa, and more specifically, Banda. Ann's book, *Making History in Banda* (2001), helped fill in some of the background I was missing from the digital repository.

One of the problems that I had with the other anthropology and archaeology articles she sent to me was an old problem - not a new one - the disciplinary articles written in these fields are for other academics in the field - not for educators. If the goal is to decolonize education and include a wider range of voices in educational resources, educators need to be able to read and understand current research.

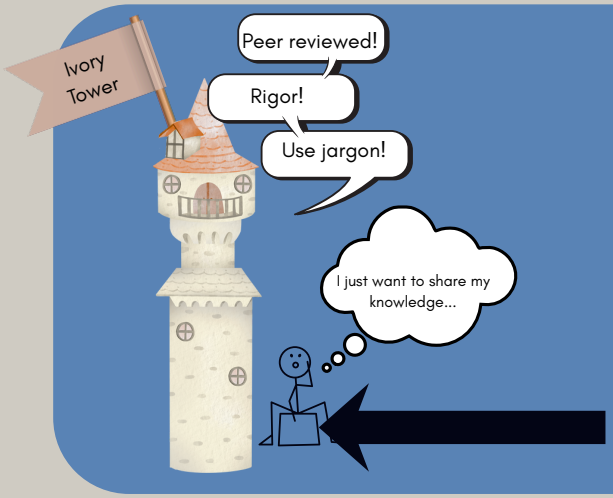


Wading through pages of charts, tables, and technical vocabulary, I found it difficult to understand the research and the importance for education.

When I consulted with Ann, she could suggest sources or provide answers and explanations. But when creating resources as an educator from only what is available online or in published work... where do you go when you don't understand?

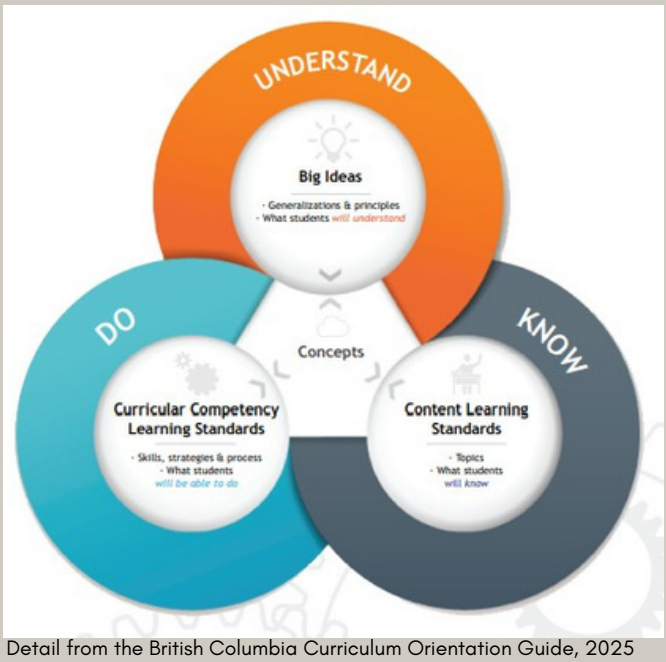
To decolonize education, we need to hear the full story about human history - not the narrative that is currently available to us globally. but... How do we get the information from African archaeology and history, from researchers, to educators, and most importantly to youth? both inside and outside of Africa?

These conversations with Ann led to the special 40th anniversary edition of *African Archaeological Review* in 2023 - *Archaeology for Education*. Funded by a SSHRC connections grant, Ann Stahl, Kathy Sanford and I worked with archaeologists to write in ways that were engaging and accessible for educators.

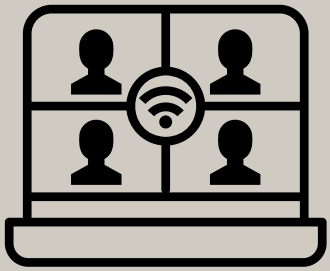


Ann and Kathy also talked about the problem with the current system in academia that values peer reviewed journal articles over any projects that mobilize knowledge for a wider audience. What counts for hiring, tenure, and promotion does not often include educational or community oriented projects.

By including a different type of article in the special edition of a peer-reviewed journal, they would 'count' and it would also show that there are other ways to mobilize knowledge. I led online workshops with archaeologists to develop a deeper understanding of educational structures such as the *Know-Do-Understand* model of learning (Allison Balabuch & Ann Stahl, 2023) and the importance of teaching rich content through story (Ann Stahl, Allison Balabuch, Kathy Sanford & Emmanuel Mushayikwa, 2023).



Detail from the British Columbia Curriculum Orientation Guide, 2025



Through the online workshops and follow-up consultations via Zoom, we were able to shape their articles in ways that educators could both understand the content area but also use sections directly with youth. We were able to work with archaeologists to help them tell the stories of their work.

Writing about research in accessible ways

If researchers in fields such as archaeology want their work to be accessible beyond disciplinary fields, more diverse ways of mobilizing knowledge need to be given equal credit as scholarly, peer-reviewed journal articles. The diversity of the articles from the special edition of African Archaeological review provide some examples of different ways to write about research.



In *Global Connections and Connected Communities in the African Past: Stories from Cowrie Shells*, stories are told from an object biography approach. Anne Haour and Abigail Moffett (2023) use the travels of a cowrie shell to illustrate the global trade entanglements of the past that stretch from Asia to Africa to North America.

Cowrie shells: Monetaria annulus, known as the "ring cowrie," at left, and Monetaria moneta, known as the "money cowrie," at right. Photo by Abigail Moffett, (Haour & Moffett, 2023)

In the article *Earth, Water, Air, and Fire – Thinking about Farming and Farmscapes* by Alexa Höhn, Emmanuel Mushayikwa and Alex Schoeman (2023) they include dynamic photos with thinking prompts and traditional songs about landscapes to tell the stories of their research.



Water thinking-shapes lapping the shores of a temporary lake in northern Burkina Faso. The trees are adapted to temporary flooding. Photo by Alexa Höhn, (Höhn, Mushayikwa, & Schoeman, 2023)

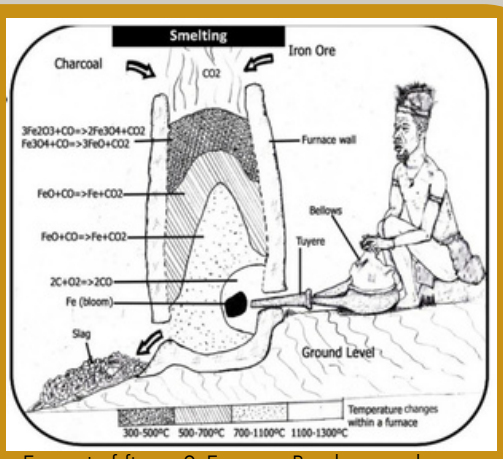


Memory of family reunited. Original artwork by Naomi Mekonen, (Basanti & Mekonen, 2023)

Using a combination of poetic-style writing and original digital artwork in the article *Communities and the Dead in Africa and Ancient Ethiopia (50–800 CE)*, Dilpreet Singh Basanti and Naomi Mekonen bring Ethiopia's traditions alive showing how ancestors are inseperable from culture.

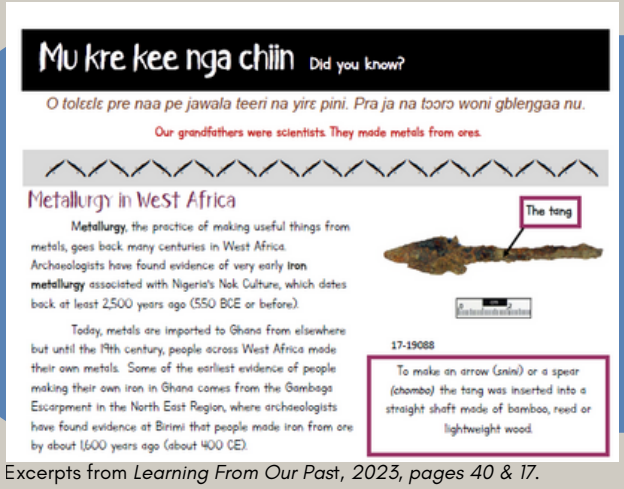
The AAR project not only opened dialogue between educators and archaeologists to create new forms of knowledge mobilization but it also made space for African and Africanist archaeologists to challenge the Eurocentric stories about African History. Foreman Bandama and Abidemi Babatunde Babalola's (2023) article *Science, Not Black Magic: Metal and Glass Production in Africa* challenges the colonial narrative that science and specifically pyrotechnology was introduced to Africa after contact with cultures originating outside of the continent.

The work of Foreman Bandama and Abidemi Babatunde Babalola resonated with the themes of both the digital repository *Banda Through Time* and with the school resource I was developing - Our grandmothers and grandfathers were knowledgeable people. School resources at all levels globally continue to portray a backwards story of Africa.



Excerpt of figure 2, Foreman Bandama and Abidemi Babatunde Babalola's (2023)

In the school resource *Learning From Our Past* (Allison Balabuch, Esther Attiogbe, & Ann Stahl, 2023), we sought to challenge this backwards, colonial story. By naming the science as science, we chose our words carefully to change the stories young people were told in school about their own heritage. "Our grandfathers were scientists. They made metals from ores" (p. 40). Our Grandmothers were scientists. They transformed clay into pots" (p.17).


Mu kre kee nga chiin Did you know?

O tolɛɛlɛ pre naa pe jawala teeri na yirɛ pini. Pra ja na tɔɔrɔ woni gblɛŋgaa nu.

Our grandfathers were scientists. They made metals from ores.

Metallurgy in West Africa

Metallurgy, the practice of making useful things from metals, goes back many centuries in West Africa. Archaeologists have found evidence of very early **iron metallurgy** associated with Nigeria's Nok Culture, which dates back at least 2,500 years ago (550 BCE or before).

Today, metals are imported to Ghana from elsewhere but until the 19th century, people across West Africa made their own metals. Some of the earliest evidence of people making their own iron in Ghana comes from the Gambaga Escarpment in the North East Region, where archaeologists have found evidence at Birimi that people made iron from ore by about 1,600 years ago (about 400 CE).

The tang

17-19088

To make an arrow (*snin*) or a spear (*chomba*) the tang was inserted into a straight shaft made of bamboo, reed or lightweight wood.


Mu kre kee nga chiin Did you know?

O lɛlɛɛlɛ pra naa pe jawala teeri na yirɛ pini. Pra ja na choo teeri na choɛ faarri.

Our grandmothers were scientists. They transformed clay into pots .

Our grandmothers were potters

Today imported metal and plastic containers are found often in kitchens in Banda. But in the past, people used locally made pottery to meet their daily needs.

Fired clay pots were used for many reasons such as to store food and water, and to cook and serve daily meals. Skilled potters made containers in many shapes and sizes to meet these different needs.

Our grandmothers were scientists

The grandmothers who were skilled potters over the centuries had **knowledge** that today we study in school called chemistry and physics.

Archeologists can help us to learn about these potters and their craft. We know that they experimented, improvised and innovated, using local materials to make things that were vital to daily life in Banda.

Excerpts from *Learning From Our Past, 2023, pages 40 & 17.*

We can learn from African and Africanist archaeologists how to tell different stories about Africa as well as how to tell these stories in more accessible ways.

> "For once a story is told, it cannot be called back. Once told, it is loose in the world. So you have to be careful with the stories you tell. And you have to watch out for the stories you are told" (Thomas King, 2003, p.10).

It is not only the stories we tell but the words we choose to tell those stories that have power. During my conversation with Enoch Mensah, a local man who has worked with Ann Stahl since 1989 and chairs the Banda Heritage Initiative, in 2022, I asked him what was the most interesting thing he ever found during his time working with Ann on archaeological digs in his community. He laughed when he answered as he said it was the smallest thing - a copper wire.

He explained that the existence of the copper wire and the depth it was found, proved the existence of metal working before colonial times.



Copper wire finger ring, Ngre Kataa (13-15th century), 2009, BTT 17-17105

These are stories that young people need to know about their local history.

Since the end of the official AAR project, I have continued to work with some of the archaeologists to create student-facing resources to complement the articles. I created an interdisciplinary unit (math, social studies, language arts) from the article *A Day on the Nile: Living in a Town in Nubia* by Julia Budka, Chloë Ward, and Carl G. Elkins that features a short story about a day in the life of a young girl in the Nubian city of Sai (Budka, Ward, & Elkins, 2023) and a unit on climate justice and story writing from the article *How African Pasts Can Inspire Alternative Responses to Climate Change: a Creative Writing Experiment* by Amanda L. Logan and Katherine M. Grillo (Logan & Grillo, 2023). The classroom resources can be found in the collection: African Archaeology in Support of School Learning through the library at the University of Victoria.

Looking forward

Decolonizing education globally does not only start in the classroom. Educational resources from textbooks to scholarly journal articles are places to start telling new stories about Africa. From Canadian Social Studies texts that focus narrowly on colonial narratives and omit Africa entirely, to Ghanaian Junior High school materials that prioritize European stories like Oliver Twist, current resources often fail to reflect multiple voices, worldviews, or local community heritage.

Community and local knowledge keepers' voices are often missing from what is considered school or academic learning. Youth and knowledge keepers need to be involved in the creation of educational resources. Collaboration across disciplines and with communities is necessary to change the stories told to youth.



Original artwork, Allison Balabuch, 2025

This type of work takes time, respect, and ongoing relational accountability. Building relationships with communities and across disciplines is necessary to shift the current colonial narrative in academic texts - whether we are talking about a Junior High School resource or an academic article.

The collaboration through the special 40th edition of African Archaeological Review is another example of how academic systems can be adapted to mobilize knowledge more effectively, challenging institutional structures that prioritize traditional peer-reviewed work over educational outreach or story-based writing structures. We need to produce texts that allow students of all ages to connect formal education with their local society, ensuring they see their own heritage, faces, and places reflected on the pages of a book.

As a new researcher, I benefitted from Ann Stahl's long, and ever-evolving career working with the community in Banda. When you take the time to look at the project history on the digital repository Banda Through Time, it becomes clear how many people have worked together in Banda before I had the privilege of joining the project in 2021. My work was built as I walked in the footsteps of all of the local people, archaeologists, and students who spent their time in Banda for over 40 years.



The sharing of local stories about Banda, Ghana, and the African continent are also vital to shift global understandings of Africa. The deficit model found or the purposeful omission of African history in Western textbooks contributes to ongoing racism and misinformation about the continent. This skewed understanding of Africa impacts how people globally read the news, interact on social media, and make economic decisions.

We must be careful with the stories we tell and the words we choose. It matters who gets to have their voice in a book.

Chapter Seven:



Bridge to Banda, Ghana, 2022

Learnings, implications, and reflections

My journey as a researcher, an educator, and a learner has been a rich adventure into the unknown. Staying open to encounters and learning events, I followed the vines that glowed to Ghana and back and... to Ghana and back again. Interwoven with these journeys to Ghana was my work with many African and Africanist archaeologists who shared their knowledge and their openness to collaborate, teach, and write in new ways. My research sought to answer the question:

What can we learn from communities, schools, and museums in Ghana to decolonize education globally?

Throughout my research, I also continued to think about the question that brought me initially to start a doctoral degree:

- How does the school system need to change to better meet the needs of students?
- These questions are interwoven with the practical questions of how and what should (could) we be teaching?
- What could education look like if we dismantle the colonial systems that are entrenched globally?

This research has several lessons for education and research globally. The colonial system needs to be dismantled and reimagined. We can learn from communities, schools and museums in Ghana that we can start by:



Valuing local knowledge systems and pedagogies



Thinking locally



Dismantling the bell schedule



Working together.



Telling truths about Africa

Valuing local knowledge systems and pedagogies

I do not question that the school system needs to change. This research was never about *should it change* and always about *how it needs to change*. It is time for what Marie Battiste (2013) terms cognitive imperialism (the validity of knowledge defined solely by white colonial, eurocentric systems) to come to an end.

Jo Chrona (2022) points out that "What is included in schools reflects what and who is valued in society" (p.145).

So... What is valued in the current colonial system?

Epistemology is concerned with ways of knowing. What sources of information do we value? What should we be learning? Local Traditional Knowledge or Indigenous Knowledge has been systemically discounted in colonial or Euro-western education even though these local knowledge systems have been in place and have guided and educated youth in communities globally from time immemorial. Vincent Adzahli-Mensah and Máiréad Dunne (2019) describe this as "epistemic violence in which indigenous knowledges are devalued" (p.49).

The current colonial education system does not have deep roots - it has tenacious tentacles that have wrapped themselves around communities across the world to maintain control of people, resources, and land.

School systems in Ghana are built on this colonial model that privileges Western/Eurocentric knowledge and language practices. The system was imported by Europeans to teach the skills such as reading, writing, and arithmetic for Ghanaians to work for European trading companies in the 1800s, whereas, traditionally, children were taught in holistic ways that included skills, knowledge and community responsibility. There have been multiple attempts in Ghana to shift the system through vocational, hands-on, practical components of education; however, the pressure for students to remain 'internationally competitive' on literacy-based examinations persists (Francis Agbodeka, 2002).

I do not argue that we need to replace reading, writing, and arithmetic with vocational and hands-on skills - we need to bring these competencies and knowledges together into a more holistic model of education. Weaving literacy and numeracy with embodied hands-on skill development allows students to experience theory in practice and gives purpose to learning.

The entanglement of theory and practice makes space for students in every country to experience the glow of learning.

The Ghanaian curriculum, like the curriculum in British Columbia, Canada, is a competency-based curriculum that calls for the development of skills intertwined with content in a *Know-Do-Understand* model of learning. The Ghanaian Language Common Core Curriculum (2020) "encourages the creation of a learning-centred classroom with the opportunity for learners to engage in meaningful "hands-on" activities that bring home to the learner what they are learning in school and what they know from outside of school" (p. 13).

Students who are engaged in learning reading, writing, mathematics, and content knowledge that is deeply connected to practical, hands-on skills are more engaged with the theory because the theory now has a personal purpose. "Students themselves form a part of the curricular content of their learning" (Shannon Leddy & Lorrie Miller, 2024).

Djangmuh Florence Kumuki's concerns about the lack of interest in potting knowledge in her community and Maxwell Gbadago's concerns about lost fishing and fish trap knowledge in Ghana are immediate concerns. Once knowledge is lost, it is difficult to get it back. The children in Akenyakrom already could not recognize that they were making a fish trap - it only takes one generation to lose cultural knowledge.



Child watching rope making in Akenyakrom, Ghana., 2022. Maxwell Gbadago (left), Dzobo Sebastian (right)

Once knowledge is lost to a community, it cannot be reclaimed easily as there is no one left to pass on the teachings. All students should be able to access all facets of learning in schools so that they have the knowledge and skills needed to live happy lives.

Owusu Alexander, the master mat weaver in Sabiye learned his craft in school. Young women in Bonakire learned potting in school during the 1970s. At the University of Victoria, Canada, in the early 2000s, Dr. Lorna Williams, Wanosts'a7, designed and taught courses in partnership with local elders and knowledge keepers that integrated hands-on practical knowledge and theory for pre-service teachers (Michele TD Tanaka, 2016). These are only a few examples of real inclusion of local and traditional knowledge in school systems. Traditional skills and practices should be taught with reading, writing, and arithmetic inside the system. But they need to be included in an authentic way so that they are seen as equally valued and not an isolated event or add-on. Weaving is mathematics. Potting is science.

Jerry Tsito, in Banda, was only able to secure permission for local knowledge to be included for 2 hours a week as a pilot project. This is a start but it is not enough. Local and traditional knowledge systems need to be interwoven into the fabric of our schools.



Archaeology students learning in the courtyard, under a neem tree at the University of Ghana - Legon, Accra, Ghana, 2022

We also need to rethink our *educational spaces* in order to decolonize. Letting go of the colonial brick school building with neat rows of desks as the ideal is important. Youth need to understand that they can learn equally important knowledge and skills at home with elders, in airplanes, garages, and under the mango trees. Flexibility and connections to the land and to other learners needs to built into physical educational spaces. The shape of the building and the uniformity of the seating is not the most important bit!

These are lessons for schools in every corner of the globe. Students in Canada like students in Ghana need the same things - connection and personal meaning in their education. Schools need to provide the skills and knowledge for students to make their own choices and pursue their own dreams. Value needs to be equally accorded to the arts and vocational skills as it is to university entrance or standardized global test scores. We need to foster and value the diversity of skills that we need in our societies rather than ranking them in a colonial scale of theoretical or 'academic' importance.

Thinking locally

Local is the key word.

Although it is important to learn about the world, it is key to first learn about your own community and the history of the land and people where you live (Shannon Leddy & Lorie Miller, 2024; Carolyn Roberts, 2024). Students need to see themselves in their school curriculum and in the stories told in their schools. Learning about local history helps students develop a deeper connection to the land but also builds knowledge that can help address current issues. For example, understanding the connection to local plants or clay sources for traditional material practices not only builds capacity to make these products but also teaches environmental knowledge and the importance of sustainability.

What we can learn from communities and knowledge keepers in Ghana is that traditional practices such as weaving, fish trap making, potting, and glass bead making teach youth more than simply a practical skill. Woven into these teachings is a respect for the land and generations of knowledge about sustainability and conservation.

Owusu Alexander and Maxwell Gbadago both talked about the plant materials they use for their weaving work and the importance of sustainable practices and the protection of the land. Youth are taught when and how to harvest plants to ensure that the materials needed will be available to future generations.



Owusu Alexander explaining which raffia palms are ready for harvest, Sabiye, Ghana, 2022.



Recycled glass beads, Ghana, 2023

The knowledge systems of glass bead making and potting teaches the importance of reduced waste and the recycling and reuse of materials rather than seeing them as garbage.

Amanda Logan and Katherine Grillo (2023) highlight the impact of local knowledge on climate education by (re)introducing traditional drought resistant foods that were replaced by imported crops through colonialism. This interconnection of cultural knowledge, education, and sustainability is necessary for youth to have the ability to be stewards of the environment.

If youth do not have the knowledge of a different way of life other than the disposable, plastic, consumer way of life that is currently destroying the planet, how can we expect them to change?

The connection between youth and the land can be more authentically developed through more targeted inclusion of plant cultivation at schools. The questions in Sabiye, Ghana, about the possibility of planting raffia palm on school grounds are one way of bridging the disconnect between schools and local practices. Traditional mat weaving would be easier to include in classrooms if the students were also learning to grow and harvest the materials onsite. In Victoria, Canada, school gardens are popping up at many locales. Besides my own small garden that focusses on edible, native plants, pollinator gardens and food gardens are also becoming more popular.



Student tending the native plant garden, Victoria, Canada, 2023

When youth develop a better understanding of their own local environments, they will also better understand the global impacts of their choices. This deeper understanding will carry with them into adulthood when then are making decisions on both local and global scales. Students will also better understand lessons from other lands and cultures as a wider global assemblage when they have a deep understanding of their local contexts.

"Rather than cutting off our roots because we are afraid of what we will find, we can learn our history. We can reimagine the relationships we have inherited, and we can take up our responsibilities to each other" (Patty Krawec, 2022, p.19).

Dismantling the bell schedule

It is important that the inclusion of these knowledge systems is not treated as an 'academic exercise'. I have seen many attempts at inclusion of Indigenous content in Canada that resembles a history lesson or a craft meant to mimic a more embodied knowledge or skill. Rather than take the time needed to understand a slow craft like weaving through embodied practice, reading, discussion, and community partnerships, it is a quick educational video and a paper weaving craft that can be accomplished in the short block of time allotted. When I weave with my classes in Canada, it is a process that takes weeks - not hours or days.

Jerry Tsito is using the limited block of time he has been allowed to wedge open the door for change in his community but he is not interested in just reading about local knowledge - he wants students to also engage in the making. He hopes that through his work, he can make the case for more time each week for local knowledge and skill development.



Jerry Tsito helping 2 students with their weaving projects, Banda-Ahenkro, Ghana, 2022

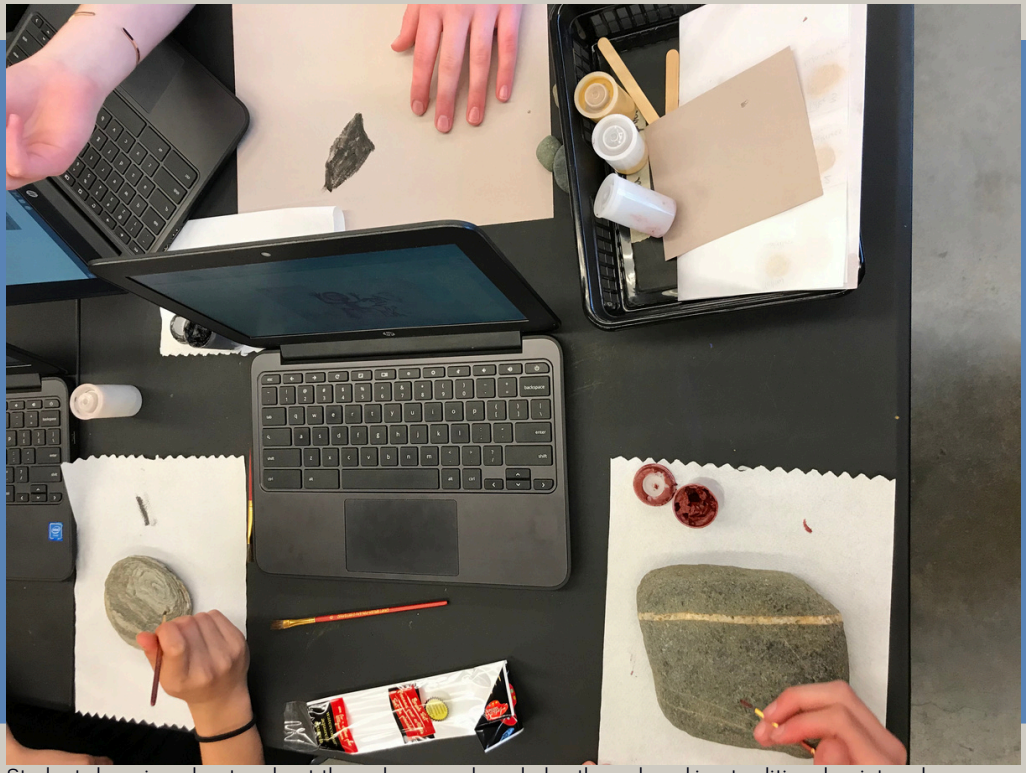
"When we relinquish colonial curriculum and pedagogies in cross-curricular contexts, we make space for all of our students to learn and grow in their ways" (Shannon Leddy & Lorrie Miller, 2024, p.9).

Decolonizing education requires more than just changing the content taught in schools by the addition of Indigenous knowledge into each school subject. The only way to dismantle the colonial system is to get off the clock and take apart the disciplinary schedule. By deconstructing disciplinary silos, we also discover the time to go deeper into learning. Western subject and block schedules run on clocktime that erode the time needed for experiential learning (Shannon Leddy & Lorrie Miller, 2024; Jo Chrona, 2022). We cannot make these changes to include Indigenous ways of knowing and learning authentically if we insist on maintaining the current structure. There isn't enough literal time in the school day.

"To live means to experience – through doing, feeling, thinking. Experience takes place over time, so time is the ultimate scarce resource we have" (Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, 1997, p. 8).

Embodied learning in an interdisciplinary model drawing on Indigenous models of education is key. Practices like weaving, potting, and bead making are not just arts curriculum – they involve mathematics, science, and history as well. Understanding the properties of local materials and the complex patterning and ratios in math are only part of the learning that happens.

Embodied learning is not done instead of reading and writing – reading and writing is an embodied practice as well. Students can research and learn theory while they engage in making. Making is a way of thinking and knowing.



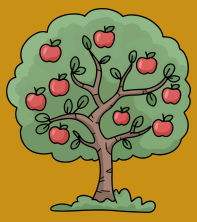
Students learning about rock art through research and also through making traditional paint and designing and painting their own art on rocks, Victoria, Canada, 2021

Here, every work is an experiment: not in the natural scientific sense of testing a preconceived hypothesis, or of engineering a confrontation between ideas 'in the head' and facts 'on the ground', but in the sense of prising an opening and following where it leads. You try things out and see what happens" (Tim Ingold, 2013, p. 6-7).

Telling truths about Africa

A key learning through my research was the misrepresentation or complete exclusion of Africa in school systems globally. The resources available in Ghana continue to include texts, stories, and activities that are disconnected from the local context.







Baseball, apple trees, and stories set in London do not resonate with students. Their inclusion also continues the colonial narrative that Western or European knowledge has more value. The students in Banda were so excited to see people and places that were familiar to them in the draft resource of *Learning From Our Past* partly because they don't have the experience of seeing themselves in educational texts. This disconnect in African educational materials is not limited to Ghana. Kelone Khudu-Petersen and Bagele Chilisa (2019) cite the example of teaching children the song "Rain, rain, go away" in an English class in the Kalahari (traditional territory of the San people) where rain is a blessing.







Texts are not neutral - the purpose of colonial school systems was to 'civilize' the African (or Indigenous) child - not to empower them. Youth in Africa need to see the value in their own history and heritage - it needs to be the main part of learning and not just a side activity after the European content is completed for an exam.

If we want to decolonize, we also need to change what is being read in schools globally. In Canada, there are very few texts about Africa available to schools and youth that don't center on a deficit model - war, famine, disease.



During my research, I asked our school librarian to help me find more books that I could add to my classroom library that focussed on African innovation, history, science, technology but she found very few resources that were appropriate and almost none in French. More needs to be written and published that highlights the richness and the depth of history, technology, and innovation of the continent if we want to address the global ignorance about Africa. This is a necessary step to address both racism and economic exploitation of resources in Africa.

The more people know, the less they can justify oppression.

William Gblerkpor talked about changing the perceptions and understanding of Africa through social media campaigns. His use of #ghana in front of his posts for #ghanaparksandmuseums and #ghanarchaeology are there to try and change the global understanding of Ghana through positive images rather than deficit stories.



Other social media content creators such as @pannaafric create daily content about the real history of Africa and @bosompixels, a forester and conservation photographer, posts about environmental truths and sustainability.



With so much content flooding social media and so much distrust, the texts and content we include in our classrooms becomes even more important. It is our responsibility as educators to find resources that tell truths - both about Africa and about local history and heritage.

If we want youth to stop and listen to content online that is challenging colonialism, racism, and hate - we need to back it up by valuing truth telling in formal educational settings.

Working together

We cannot make these changes in isolation. The colonial system is strong, entrenched, and doesn't want to give up its power over the world. The only way forward is to work together as artists, photographers, writers, archaeologists, educators, museums, schools, and communities - communities that include youth voices. Creating culturally inclusive educational materials, content, and pedagogy takes more than a village - it takes a globe.

The relationship building, respect, and reciprocity takes time but it is key. If we continue to work separately, we will continue to see the current system persevere.



(L-R) Dzono Reuben, Maxwell Gbadago, and Ann Stahl looking at footage of fish trap making, Akanyakrom, Ghana, 2022



William Gblerkpor and me at the museum of Natural and Cultural Heritage at Shai, Ghana, 2023, Photo credit: Johnny

This collaboration includes more meaningful dialogue between different levels of schools - primary, secondary, and tertiary. Currently, university instructors are saying students aren't prepared for their courses but high school teachers are saying they must continue to value tests and heavy text-based content to prepare students for university. This dialogue also needs to include educational governing bodies who make decisions about public education. Those doing research in education but also in other disciplines need to share their work in ways that those outside the discipline can understand.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'O (2005) asked, "What directions should an educational system in an Africa wishing to break from neo-colonialism take?" (p.101). It is the same question that Indigenous scholars such as Marie Battiste (2000; 2013), Jo Chrona (2022), and Carolyn Roberts (2024) ask about the systems in Canada. I believe the decolonial direction we need to go is clear - but it is important that we do it together.

Implications for research?

The idea that we must change our educational systems globally is not new. Paulo Freire, Ivan Illich, and John Dewey have been talking about it for over a century. Indigenous scholars have written widely about decolonizing education including extensive suggestions on how it can be done.

The decolonizing work of Lorna Williams, Kathy Sanford, Tim Hopper, Marie Battiste, Jo Chrona, Carolyn Roberts, Bagele Chilisa, Jo Ann Archibald, Shannon Leddy, and Lorrie Miller have all resonated with me and inspired me.

Archaeologists like Ann Stahl and William Gblerkpor have been doing extensive decolonizing work in their own disciplines of archaeology and anthropology.



Decolonizing the institutions - original artwork by Allison Balabuch

My research points to the need for researchers across disciplines to now work together and talk - share their theories, knowledge, and ideas. We can learn from each other when we break down the barriers of academia, imposed by the same colonial system we are questioning; only then can we start to make real change.

Reflections

I close now with just my words.

I began this research with a simple desire to add my voice to the body of research and knowledge that could help decolonize education. Because my quest was so open-ended, I was open to learning from a vast variety of community members, knowledge keepers, archaeologists, educators, and youth both here in Canada and in Ghana. I always tell my students that sometimes, you don't know that you don't know something, until you know. I feel this way about Ghana and the African continent in general. Until this research, I knew very little about Africa and nothing about Ghana.

I didn't know that I didn't know.

The impact of this ignorance is that I was teaching generations of students nothing about Africa - well besides Ancient Egypt. I also didn't know that there were no camels in Ancient Egypt (Thanks, Julia Budka!). Too bad the grade 7 history textbook portrays a camel on the introductory page to the unit - I guess the editors and writers don't know either.

I had the same feeling when I first learned about residential schools in Canada, when I learned about Japanese internment camps, and when I learned about the Chinese head tax. Even though I had taken courses in university on Canadian history, we were never taught the truth about our own country.

This is not ok.

Including first names of authors proved more difficult than you would think - especially when co-authors were community members or graduate students. I had to at times search the whole paper for a caption on an image or do a deep dive based on the information provided to find a first name. It is a reminder that academia may include more voices now than ever before, but even those included at times become relegated to an 'et al'.

May you all be more than an *et al.* as you do this important work.

It was important to me as I did this work to keep the audience in mind for my writing - for our articles for the special edition of *African Archaeological Review*, for the school resource *Learning From Our Past*, and for this dissertation. What I learned is that through the intertwining of image and text, I often had to edit the text. If there was no image or artwork to pair with the text, I asked myself if it needed to be said - or had I already said it. When I had an important image, I asked myself what I hadn't said.

When you are writing something, who do you envision will read it?

Some food for thought.

My goal in writing this dissertation was to include you, the reader, in the rich journey I had experienced. My goal was that it would be not only accessible but engaging and inspiring - Inspiring for you to join me in making change and inspiring you to question what you don't know you don't know.

I come out of this research with an even stronger conviction that we need to decolonize educational systems but I also emerge with more tools, knowledge, and inspiration to keep pushing back in my everyday teaching practice.

"Decolonizing is about justice, equity, and ensuring a better future for all generations" (Kristy McLeod & Phyllis Webstad, 2025, p.263).

Who doesn't want to work together towards that?

References

Adelle, C. (2019). Creating knowledge democracy in South Africa : the role of communities of practice. *South African Journal of Science*, 115(7-8), 12–14. https://doi.org/10.17159/sajs.2019/5888

Adichie, C. N. (2009). *The danger of a single story* [Video]. TED Talks. https://www.ted.com/talks/chimamanda_ngozi_adichie_the_danger_of_a_single_story?utm_campaign=tedspread&utm_medium=referral&utm_source=tedcomshare

Adzahlie-Mensah,V. & Dunne, M. (2019). Continuing in the shadows of colonialism: The educational experiences of the African Child in Ghana. *Perspectives in Education*, *36*(2). https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v36i2.5

Agbodeka, F. (2002). Education in Ghana: Yesterday and Today. *Ghana Studies 5*, 21-42.

Ahmed, S. (2017). *Living a feminist life*. Duke University Press.

Anquandah, J. (1982). Archeological Reconnaissance and Excavations in the Shai Hills, Ghana. *Nyame Akuma.* (21). 15-17.

Anquandah, J. (2013). The People of Ghana: Their Origins and Their Culture. *Transactions of the Historical Society of Ghana*, *15*, 1–25. http://www.jstor.org/stable/43855009

Asase, A., Akwetey, G. A., & Achel, D. G. (2010). Ethnopharmacological use of herbal remedies for the treatment of malaria in the Dangme West District of Ghana. *Journal of Ethnopharmacology*, *129*(3), 367–376. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jep.2010.04.001

Azoulay, A.A. (2024). Civil Imagination - A political ontology of photography. Verso.

Babalola, A. B. (2022). Glass beads in West Africa. In *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Anthropology*

Balabuch, A., Rasoarifetra, B. (2023). Why Weaving? Teaching Heritage, Mathematics, Science and the Self. *African Archaeological Review* 40, 481–49. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10437-023-09541-w

Balabuch, A., Stahl, A.B. (2023). School Learning Enriched by Doing: An Apprenticing Model. *African Archaeological Review* 40, 469–479 . https://doi.org/10.1007/s10437-023-09540-x

Balabuch, A., Attiogbe, E., Stahl, A.B. (2023). *Learning From our Past*.

Bandama, F., Babalola, A.B. (2023). Science, Not Black Magic: Metal and Glass Production in Africa. *African Archaeological Review* 40, 531–543. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10437-023-09545-6

Barad, K. (2006). *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning.* Duke University Press.

Basanti, D.S., Mekonen, N. (2023). Communities and the Dead in Africa and Ancient Ethiopia (50–800 CE). *African Archaeological Review* 40, 567–576. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10437-023-09548-3

Bateson, M. C. (1994). *Peripheral visions : learning along the way* (1st ed.). HarperCollins Publishers.

Battiste, M. (2000). Maintaining Aboriginal identity, language, and culture in modern society. In M. Battiste (Ed.), *Reclaiming Indigenous voice and vision*. UBC Press. 192-208.

Battiste, M. (2013). Displacing Cognitive Imperialism. In *Decolonizing Education* (pp. 158–166). University of British Columbia Press. https://doi.org/10.59962/9781895830972-009

Bazzul, J. (2016). Disturbance and intensive methodology in capitalist ruins. In M. Thomas & R. Bellingham (Authors), *Post-Qualitative Research and Innovative Methodologies* (pp. 117–133). London: Bloomsbury Academic. Retrieved March 8, 2025, from http://dx.doi.org/10.5040/9781350062078.0015

Berns, M. C. (2007). Pottery-Making in Bonakire, Ghana. *African Arts*, 40(1), 86–91. https://doi.org/10.1162/afar.2007.40.1.86

Brinkmann, S. (2014). Doing Without Data. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *20*(6), 720–725. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800414530254

Budka, J., Ward, C. & Elkins, C.G. (2023). A Day on the Nile: Living in a Town in Nubia. *African Archaeological Review* 40, 555–566. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10437-023-09547-4

Burdock, M. (2021). *The Queen of Snails: A Graphic Memoir*. eScholarship, University of California.

Campbell, R. (2005) Primary education or primary schooling?. *Education.* 3-13, 33(1) 3-6, DOI: 10.1080/03004270585200021

Cannon, S. O. (2018). Teasing Transcription: Iterations in the Liminal Space Between Voice and Text. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *24*(8), 571–582. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417742412

Charman, K., & Dixon, M. (2021). *Theory and methods for public pedagogy research* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003011491.

Chilisa, B., Major, T. E., & Khudu-Petersen, K. (2017). Community engagement with a postcolonial, African-based relational paradigm. *Qualitative Research : QR*, *17*(3), 326–339. https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794117696176

Chrona, J. (2022). *Wayi Wah! Indigenous Pedagogies - An Act for reconciliation and Anti-Racist Education.* Portage & Main Press.

Cibils, L. (2019). The Underreported Significance of Transcription Decisions: Perspectives Gained from Two Different Vantage Points. *Qualitative Report*, *24*(5), 1133–1146. https://doi.org/10.46743/2160-3715/2019.3801

Dewey, J. (2001). *The School and Society and The Child and the Curriculum*. Dover publications.

Csikszentmihalyi, M. (1997). *Finding Flow - The psychology of engagement with everyday life.* Basic Books.

Deleuze, G., & Guattari, F. (1987). *A thousand plateaus : capitalism and schizophrenia*. University of Minnesota Press.

Deleuze, G. (1995). *Negotiations, 1972-1990*. Columbia University Press, Original work published 1990.

Dixon, M. (2016). Who is in my office and which century/ies are we in? A pedagogical encounter. In *Post-Qualitative Research and Innovative Methodologies* (pp. 102–116). Bloomsbury Publishing Plc. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350062078.0014

Dores Cruz, M. (2011). "Pots are pots, not people:" material culture and ethnic identity in the Banda Area (Ghana), nineteenth and twentieth centuries. *Azania*, *46*(3), 336–357. https://doi.org/10.1080/0067270X.2011.629525

Edwards, E. (2012). Objects of Affect: Photography Beyond the Image. *Annual Review of Anthropology.*, *41*(1), 221–234. https://doi.org/info:doi/

Frank, B.E. (2021). *Griot Potters of the Folona - The History of an African Ceramic Tradition*. Indiana University press.

Freire, P. (2000). Pedagogy of the oppressed – 50th anniversary edition. Bloomsbury Publishing.

Gblerkpor, W. (2021). National Parks And The Future Of Museums In Ghana. *In A New Chapter - Ghana's Museums and Cultural Heritage*. 9-13. ANO Institute of Arts & Knowledge.

Graham, H., & Vergunst, J. (2019). *Heritage as community research: legacies of co-production*. Policy Press. https://doi.org/10.56687/9781447345305

Graham, C. K. (1971). *The history of education in Ghana : from the earliest times to the Declaration of Independence*. F. Cass. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203042939

Gwekwerere, Y. N. & Shumba, O. (2021). A call for transformative learning in Southern Africa: Using Ubuntu pedagogy to inspire sustainability thinking and climate action. In R. Iyengar & C. T. Kwauk (Eds.), *Curriculum and learning for climate action. Toward an SDG 4.7 roadmap for systems change* (pp. 188-205). Leiden: Brill.

Haour, A., Moffett, A. (2023). Global Connections and Connected Communities in the African Past: Stories from Cowrie Shells. *African Archaeological Review* 40, 545–553. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10437-023-09546-5

Henri, D. A., Martinez-Levasseur, L. M., Provencher, J. F., Debets, C. D., Appaqaq, M., & Houde, M. (2022). Engaging Inuit youth in environmental research: Braiding Western science and Indigenous knowledge through school workshops. *The Journal of Environmental Education*, 53(5), 261–279. https://doi.org/10.1080/00958964.2022.2125926

Höhn, A., Mushayikwa, E. & Schoeman, A. (2023). Earth, Water, Air, and Fire – Thinking about Farming and Farmscapes. *African Archaeological Review* 40, 493–505. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10437-023-09542-9

Illich, I. (1971). *Deschooling society*. Harper & Row.

Ingold, T. (2013). *Making : anthropology, archaeology, art and architecture*. Routledge. https://www.taylorfrancis.com/books/9780203559055

Jackson, A. Y. (2017). Thinking Without Method. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *23*(9), 666–674. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800417725355

Jackson, A. Y., & Mazzei, L. A. (2013). Plugging One Text Into Another: Thinking With Theory in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *19*(4), 261–271. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800412471510

Justice, D. H. (2018). *Why indigenous literatures matter* (1st ed.). Wilfrid Laurier University Press. https://doi.org/10.51644/9781771121774

Karp, I. (1991). Culture and Representation. In I. Karp & S.D. Lavine (Eds) *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display*. Smithsonian Institution Press. (11-24).

King, T. (2003). *The truth about stories.* Dead Dog Café Productions Inc. and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Kimmerer, R.W. (2024). *The Serviceberry - Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World.* Scribner.

Kradolfer, P.J., Djaba, N.E. (2020). *The Art of Recycled Glass Beads.* Ghana Art Publications Inc.

Krawec, P. (2022). *Becoming Kin - An Indigenous Call to Unforgetting the Past and Reimagining Our Future.* Broadleaf Books.

Khudu-Petersen, K., & Chilisa, B. (2019). Diagnosing Elements of Colonization in Indigenous Education: An African Effort to Research and Transform Education for Indigenous Peoples. In L. T. Smith & E. A. McKinley (Eds.), *Handbook of Indigenous Education* (pp. 997–1012). Springer Singapore. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-981-10-3899-0_41

Lambert, L. (2019). Becoming teacher, becoming researcher: reconsidering data analysis in post-qualitative practitioner research. *Practice (Abingdon, England)*, *1*(2), 151–168. https://doi.org/10.1080/25783858.2019.1659633

Lather, P. (2013). Methodology-21: what do we do in the afterward? *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *26*(6), 634–645. https://doi.org/10.1080/09518398.2013.788753

Lave, J., & Wenger, E. (1991). *Situated learning. Legitimate peripheral participation*. Cambridge University Press.

Leddy, S. & Miller, L. (2024). *Teaching Where You Are - Weaving Indigenous and Slow Principles and Pedagogies*. University of Toronto Press.

Leigh, K. & Davis, M.D, (2017). U.S. Public Education: The Ivy Tower of Historical Trauma. *Journal of Philosophy & History of Education*. 67(1). 19-34

Logan, A. L., & Cruz, M. D. (2014). Gendered Taskscapes: Food, Farming, and Craft Production in Banda, Ghana in the Eighteenth to Twenty-first Centuries. *African Archaeological Review*, 31(2), 203–231. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10437-014-9155-6

Logan, A.L., Grillo, K.M. (20.23) How African Pasts Can Inspire Alternative Responses to Climate Change: a Creative Writing Experiment. *African Archaeological Review* 40, 507–517. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10437-023-09543-8

Loveless, N. (2019). *How to Make Art at the End of the World - A Manifesto for Research Creation*. Duke University Press.*Creation*. Duke University Press.

Lupi, G., & Posavec, S. (2016). *Dear data* (First edition.). Princeton Architectural Press.

MacLure, M. (2013). Researching without representation? Language and materiality in post-qualitative methodology. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *26*(6), 658–667. https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1080/09518398.2013.78875

Mazzei, L. A. (2013). A voice without organs: interviewing in posthumanist research. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, 26(6), 732–740. https://doi-org.ezproxy.library.uvic.ca/10.1080/09518398.2013.788761

McKinney, C. (2017). *Language and power in post-colonial schooling : ideologies in practice* (1st ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315730646

Mcleod, K., Webstad, P. (2025). *Decolonization and Me - Conversations about Healing a Nation and Ourselves*. Medicine Wheel Publishing.

Montague, D. (2022). ÉNERGIERICH: Centering Culture in Solar Energy. *Earth Island Journal*, *37*(1), 15–15.

Moran, J. (2010). *Interdisciplinarity* (2nd ed.). Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203866184

Morris, E. (2011). *Believing is Seeing (Observations on the Mysteries of Photography).* The Penguin Press.

Nathan, M. J. (2022). *Foundations of embodied learning: A paradigm for education*. Routledge.

National Council for Curriculum & Assessment. (2025, March 5). *Development of the Ghanaian Curriculum - NACCA*. NaCCA. https://nacca.gov.gh/curriculum/

National Council for Curriculum and Assessment. (2020). *Ghanaian Language Common Core Programme Curriculum (7-10).* Ministry of Education, Ghana.

Ngugi Wa Thiong'O. (2005). *Decolonising the Mind - The politics of language in african literature.* James Currey.

Owusu, Alexander Kwame. (2024). *Making of a Raffia Palm Mat (Dɛŋglɛ)*, Sabiye, Banda District, Bono Region, Ghana. British Museum Endangered Material Knowledge Program. Notes compiled by Ann B. Stahl (2020LG05-MM01-0218)

Plath, D. W. (1998). Calluses: When culture gets under your skin. In J. Singleton (Ed.), *Learning in likely places. Varieties of apprenticeship in Japan* (pp. 341–351). Cambridge University Press.

Pojar, J., Alaback, P. B., Antos, J., Goward, T., Lertzman, K. P. (Kenneth P., MacKinnon, A. (Andrew), Pojar, J., Pojar, R. A., Reed, A. J., Turner, N. J., & Vitt, D. H. (Dale H. (2004). *Plants of coastal British Columbia, including Washington, Oregon & Alaska* (Revised edition.). Lone Pine Pub.

Poland, B. D. (1995). Transcription Quality as an Aspect of Rigor in Qualitative Research. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *1*(3), 290–310. https://doi.org/10.1177/107780049500100302

Province of British Columbia. (2025). *BC's Curriculum – Curriculum Redesign*. https://curriculum.gov.bc.ca/rethinking-curriculum. Accessed 2 December, 2025.

Roberts, C. (2024). *Re-Storying Education - Decolonizing Your Practice Using a Critical Lens*. Page Two.

Robertson, L. (2014). Rethinking Material Culture: Ugandan Bark Cloth. *Textile Society of America Symposium Proceedings*. 897. http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/tsaconf/897

Roeschley, A., & Kim, J. (2019). "Something that feels like a community": the role of personal stories in building community-based participatory archives. *Archival Science*, *19*(1), 27–49. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09302-2

Rose, G. (2023). *Visual methodologies : an introduction to researching with visual materials* (5th edition.). SAGE Publications Ltd.

Sanford, K., Williams, L., Hopper, T., & McGregor, C. (2012). Indigenous Principles Decolonizing Teacher Education: What We Have Learned. *In Education*, 18(2), 18–34.

Snively , G., & Williams, W. L. (2016). *Knowing Home: Braiding Indigenous Science with Western Science*. University of Victoria.

Sousanis, N. (2015). *Unflattening*. University of Harvard Press.

Stahl, A.B. (2025). From "Studying Prehistory" to "Making History" to "Co-creating Heritage": Reflections on a Journey. *African Archaeological Review* 42, 361–381. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10437-025-09632-w

Stahl, A.B., Balabuch, A., Sanford, K. *et al.* (2023). African Archaeology in Support of School Learning: An Introduction. *African Archaeological Review* 40, 455–468. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10437-023-09539-4

Stahl, A.B. (2001). *Making History in Banda - Anthropological Visions of Africa's Past.* Cambridge University Press.

Staiff. R., Bushell, R. & Kennedy, P. (2002). Interpretation in National Parks: Some Critical Questions. *Journal of Sustainable Tourism*, 10:2, 97-113. https://doi.org/10.1080/09669580208667156

St Pierre, E. A. (1997). Methodology in the fold and the irruption of transgressive data. *International Journal of Qualitative Studies in Education*, *10*(2), 175–189. https://doi.org/10.1080/095183997237278

St Pierre, E. A. (2019). Post Qualitative Inquiry in an Ontology of Immanence. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *25*(1), 3–16. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800418772634

St Pierre, E. A. (2021). Post Qualitative Inquiry, the Refusal of Method, and the Risk of the New. *Qualitative Inquiry*, *27*(1), Article 1077800419863005. https://doi.org/10.1177/1077800419863005

Styres, S. Zinga, D., Lilley, S., Tomlins-Jahke, H. (2019). Opening - Contested Spaces and Expanding the Indigenous Education Agenda. In S. Styres, D. Zinga, S. Lilley, H. Tomlins-Jahke (Eds) *Indigenous Education - New Directions in Theory and Practice.* University of Alberta Press.

Tanaka, M. TD. (2016). *Learning and Teaching Together - Weaving Indigenous Ways of Knowing Into Education.* UBC Press.

Thayer-Bacon, B. J. (2017).Introduction: What Does Ontology Have to Do With Education? *Counterpoints*, *505*, 1–13. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45177693

Thayer-Bacon, B. J. (2017). Water: James's pure experience. *Counterpoints*, *505*, 15–32. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45177694

Thayer-Bacon, B. J. (2017). Plants: Deleuze's and Guattari's Rhizomes. *Counterpoints*, *505*, 63–88. http://www.jstor.org/stable/45177696

The British Museum. (2025, February 24). *Endangered material knowledge programme*. Endangered Material Knowledge Programme. https://www.emkp.org/

The Make and Do Book (1982) *Childcraft - The how and why library*. (Vol. 11). World Book Inc.

Thiaw, I. & Ly, M.A. (2020) Heritage management, community engagement and resilience in Senegal in V. Higgins & D. Douglas, (Eds.) *Communities and cultural heritage : global issues, local values* . Routledge/Taylor & Francis Group. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003031192

University of Victoria. (2025). *Improving African futures using lessons from the past - Banda Through Time*. Digital Exhibits. https://exhibits.library.uvic.ca/spotlight/iaff

Trouillot, M.-R. (2015). *Silencing the past : power and the production of history* (2nd ed.). Beacon Press.

Van Valkenburg, M. E. (1990). An engineering curriculum for the future. *IEEE Communications Magazine*, vol. 28, no. 12,12-15. doi: 10.1109/35.61715.

Vellanki, V. (2022). Shifting the Frame: Theoretical and Methodological Explorations of Photography in Educational Research. *Cultural Studies, Critical Methodologies*, *22*(2), 132–142. https://doi.org/10.1177/15327086211045976

Wayessa, B.S. (2023). My Meals Are in the Pots: Making Pots and Meals in Wollega, Southwest Ethiopia. *African Archaeological Review,* 40, 519–529. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10437-023-09544-7

Webb, J. (2020). *Design principles for photography*. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003103493

Wilson, S. (2008). *Research is Ceremony: Indigenous Research Methods.* Fernwood Publishing.

Woets, R. (2014). The recreation of modern and African art at Achimoto School in the Gold Coast (1927-52). *Journal of African History*, *55*(3), 445–466. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0021853714000590

Wright, S. (2010). *Understanding creativity in early childhood: Meaning-making and children's drawings*. SAGE. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446251447

Yamada, S. (2009). "Traditions" and cultural production: Character training at the Achimota School in colonial Ghana. *History of Education*, *38*(1), 29–59. https://doi.org/10.1080/00467600701505102