Gifts Of Learning: The Creation of an Innovative Website to Decolonize and Indigenize Curriculum

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Abstract

This project is an offering for teachers, students and workshop facilitators. It encourages the revival of traditional structures in Indigenous storytelling. The gift giving promotes the facilitation of storytelling, scaffolds cultural identity. The gifts of learning website offers a method for teachers to facilitate culturally inclusive lesson plans.

Introduction

My English name is Robyn Kruger. I am a status BC First Nations woman responsible to develop research inspired by the methodologies that respect Okanagan Peoples culture. I understand cultural protocols involving intergenerational knowledge that are obtained through the experience of living as a Syilx- Okanagan person. Although I have not participated in a life immersed in Native culture, my involvement in ceremony and cultural practice has been a lifetime responsibility. I understand that stating I am a Native who relates my ideas to my involvement to cultural practices could possibly devalue my research because of the mystifications and assumptions made socially. The stereotypes are like a living entity, perpetuated into society for many generations. It may even dehumanize my character and devalue my cultural practice and spiritual beliefs if I locate myself in my institutional space. I have learned that my Art Based Research is geared towards inclusive creative learning inspired by Indigenous pedagogy. To obtain the knowledge relating to my practice as an educator I have had to offer historical perspectives that would have me playing specific roles as the Native expert facilitating cultural workshops for elementary to adolescent aged students, and adults. The awkward position racializes me and promotes an oppressed expectation when working for school districts, and when participating in Aboriginal subject(s) in a University class.

My Identity has a Story

My real name is c'ac'owet-Mistsunbeams, shining through the clouds.

I did not grow up immersed in culture. I am a mixed-blood from the Okanagan Nation. Through the process of indoctrination of my Skaxa family who had become segregated from both town, the city of Penticton (senpencton), and from the rest of the folks who shared the same Band membership. The assimilation process gave my family what I like to believe is as many gifts of ethnicity, instead of discussing the detrimental cultural exclusion of Indigenous values and beliefs that exist in the Southern Interior of British Columbia I would like to share fragments of the discovery of my Indianness, or my Nativeness and my tribal identity.

The discovery that I had an Indian Identity that was tangible for my spiritual growth, for my health and my identity achievement was a success; only due to Indigenous knowledge encouraging my growth and through embodying survival tactics I ended up at the University. While I am here I plan to do what it takes to promote culturally relevant and inclusive lesson plans for the school system. The fact that I am researching ways to do that in a Masters program is a miracle but for me the real success was when I learned how to dance Okanagan traditional dance style –Syilx wanx in my mid 20's. The stories of today will of course be different from our Ancestors stories, the storytellers were mindful in their performance when telling them to the people and children of our communities. The storytellers had to travel by foot or by horse, or canoe from community to community, to encourage connections, promote experiential identity forming, to shape a positive worldview and offer spiritual development. Graveline. J - *Creative storytelling is a good outlet for documenting reflecting on emotions. I have adopted it as a method of assisting myself and students in releasing feelings and transforming personal pain into structural change*. Due to the generational pain that exists for our Aboriginal children I feel that traditional storytelling offers more than an experience but a shift that can elevate ones spirit to heal.

Story Drama as Decolonization

I have researched the progression of children's books; Tate.H (1996) *Adventures of Txamsm Series*, Frieson.W.J.(2000) *Legends of The Elders,*Series,Bouchard.D.(2011) *Turtle Island Voices,* artist based scholars, and participants within the social context of the University learning institution. With this project I offer the fusion of two teaching pedagogies- Indigenous knowledge and structures for social change offered by applied theatre. This project also gives an opportunity to decolonize the colonial structure. To give an insight and rearrange ideas for lesson plans. The following curriculum offers change within the classroom community, and gives an opportunity for success in our Aboriginal students. Dr. Monica Prendergast, introduced me to the book by Bishop "The Social Turn Collaboration and its discontents" (2012) after I received a BFA and majoring in Visual Arts. I had begun to wonder how my own art practice, Indigeniety and how my teacher training would correlate with one another? I began to see the solution. When combining the two pedagogies; I can create experiences that make social change a possibility within the classroom while building a stronger, socially inclusive classroom community, at the same time offer an Indigenous experiential learning experience, that can

provide identity achievement through the experience. The two formulated a parallel and when I began facilitating Story Drama's structure that I had learned in Applied Theatre studies combined with traditional stories from the Okanagan Nation the phenomena became as I imagined it to become. I enabled a fusion. Bishop.C (2012) says *"the productive contradiction of art's relationship to social change, which is characterized by the paradox of the belief in art's autonomy and it being inextricably bound to the promise of a better world. While antimony in many avant-garde practices of the last century, it seems particularly pertinent to analyzing participatory art and the legitimating narratives it has attracted. In short the aesthetic doesn't need to be sacrificed at the altar of social change, because it already always contains ameliorative promise"(pg.29.)* When it comes to socially engaged art practices, the participatory moment becomes the artistic integration of experiential learning, not focusing on the aesthetic but reversing the context and creating a growth pattern.

I was disappointed at the lack of knowledge on my own culture group while I searched for the resources available by the Ministry, available at libraries throughout my teacher training and noticed they still at times demonstrated the historical influence of discrimination for all Aboriginal groups; the racialization was still evident within the lessons too and even by the way things were being instructed. I witnessed the old colonial design and I was again disappointed that the Aboriginal students were missing out on the true Traditional Storytelling methods; maybe they did not have the knowledge to know better or have not made the changes yet? As educators, I invite us to forget the Aboriginal poster design at the back of the classroom. I feel it is necessary to integrate true storytelling methods into curriculum; the surface solution of hanging posters about aboriginal education models will not suffice. Cultural inclusivity does not mean hanging a poster of a Native methodology that can promote social change, or draw a Native design and send a message of inclusion. The cultural appropriation age has to end the token Indian system also has to end. Methods of Indigenous Storytelling are not being practiced within the school system and this website offers certain curriculum items from Aboriginal stories that can be fused with western education methods. With the website I offer more than a poster. In fact, the website shows Indigenous teaching pedagogy exists into action and can be taught from the Indigenized lesson plans available and Story Dramas available with workshop notes from a template. The stories I chose are legitized traditional stories that have been

published, with tribal knowledge and languages. I was honored to receive the cultural training from the Okanagan –Syilx Nation and now I am happy to share with teachers and students my knowledge. For example, how I know the difference between a true Indigenous story, which usually includes the language, Aboriginal educators are aware of the token Indian model. The teaching pedagogies that I include in my project fuse the commonalities in our teaching pedagogies both encourage identity formation and development and offer social change through art gifting, enlightening the imaginations of students and participants.

Understanding Curriculum

How do we evolve as scholars and maintain balance when the levels of advancement in pursuing western academy do not step with the way people of a culturally diverse society live? The human experience influences each person's knowledge structure non-universally. The person's identity formation is not of a mechanistic device; we have our own independent bodies and we build our own knowledge based on living. Growth through experiential learning phenomenological shifts from one phase to another "Indigenous Knowledge's" taught; an intergenerational practice is to influence change so the spirit may grow to the next.

Delivering responsible educational systems combines pedagogy, crossing the boundaries without disrespecting protocols of a group. Marginalizations' were not navigated or promoted by my culture but we now have the honor of carefully navigating through groupisms, labeling, sensitive dismemberment of cultures and genders nonetheless identity encouragement, cultural values, and spiritual systems makes my project ideal for it is useful and does not contain an exclusive design.

The Connections Between the Creative Process and Experiential Learning

The creative process is natural and not a destructive force. When we make things right within us, individually, we can physically involve ourselves in a creative act. We may express ourselves through language, by telling stories, or by making something all the while we are all connected to the same creation expressed from a single body. The vehicle makes certain that everything is safe. There are Native ways of understanding that dominant culture has neglected to inform society about. The knowledge the people have, such as, the experiential side of the

hunter gatherer is used without engaging, over thinking the creative process and we still do this automatically but in our creating. We explore, hunt, gather, seek, search out undiscovered areas with curiosity, this is a natural source that all human beings have once they realize their connectedness.

As Armstong.J.C (1991)

> *"You learn in the Native Ceremony to come to terms with yourself. You don't try to be super human or to be non-human. You accept being human. You embrace it. We are not perfect. You see the human as a loving contributing machine which has its problems"* (pg.57).

She adds,

> *"It comes to the point where you can say that to be a true Native is to be a lot broader in your perspective, to be inclusive in al l of the human family; being committed to making a contribution to everyone, not just one people; being a spiritual warrior in the belief that people are great and loving, no matter what culture"* (pg.60).

Indigenizing Curriculum

In the website project I have also provided a downloadable thematic art lesson plan. There are 5 lessons that match the British Columbia Prescribed Learning Outcomes standards. I wanted to show art teachers a way to integrate Aboriginal art into their classroom without appropriating the actual art designs. It was made clear to me that some BC certified art teachers had not felt comfortable bringing Aboriginal art contexts into their curriculum; in fact there had been an incident when I was called to a middle school to facilitate a cultural arts talk, in which a Non-First Nations art teacher became emotional about the subject afterwards. She had been very grateful for my lesson and explained what she had learned from her past experience, she knew it was the respectful thing to do as a teacher but felt uncomfortable because she was no near an expert at her topic. My curiosity had grown; I wondered if the desire to assimilate and dominate Indigenous Peoples' education systematically through racializing, grouping, and grouping unequally generationally transferred to her, somehow? The psychological impacts were not her responsibility but it was her responsibility to abide by the Aboriginal Protocols while teaching in the local First Nations territories of the Songhees and Esquimalt Peoples. I was happy she had learned about protocols, and appropriation but could not help her with her anguish. In that moment I was reminded of my own responsibilities as an Aboriginal Educator. I don't see my identity as being difficult, indifferent, uncomfortable, or inappropriate, I accept and love to teach

other styles of art as I am an informed and well trained art teacher. The difference is I am labeled, and was submerged into a rational educational discourse, my own education obtained by an assimilationist agenda. I had been generationally transformed, and intergenerationally traumatized from a culturally segregated sukanaken- Okanagan (a place where everything is beautiful, including everything on it, and within it.) I am reminded of the words by Sandy Grande (2004), a "Red Pedagogy is historically grounded in local and tribal narratives, intellectually informed by ancestral ways of knowing, politically centered in issues of sovereignty, and morally inspired by the deep connections among the earth, its beings, and the spirit."(p.35)"

Lesson Plans

The lesson plans are experiential based and identity based, and are fused together, and they are Indigenized lesson plans because I used both systems of pedagogy to create them. They are inclusive for everyone, I am experienced enough in my own cultural research to create them and I know what it feels like to be excluded from not one class of Indigenous Education but of a lifetime of education. Cultural values and spiritual systems are everywhere, like kulencuten- Great spirit is we have the knowledge to decolonize the systematic agenda with collaborating systems for social change in art making.

Story Dramas

Lessons available on the website have the potential to also revitalize Indigenous Storytelling, fuse pedagogy and inspire social change within the classroom community. The ultimate value of Indigenous storytelling is to scaffold identity. Each system connects and builds uniqueness, celebrates a transforming curriculum and deconstructs a colonial agenda. On the website there are three Indigenous Story Dramas, I would like to fulfill my purpose and retrieve more stories but the stories must be legitized, published, and I would not create the curriculum unless I had the permission to do so.

Indigenized Art Curriculum

I have chosen to upload my thematic lesson plan to make it available for other art teachers the class is for Studio Art Foundations 8-12. The lessons model Indigenous experiential

learning. The tactile performance of releasing energy to create an object is an Indigenous art system. The experiential side promotes identity achievement, encourages content building, coordination with tools and materials. I was very surprised and happy to discover how we can match the BC Ministries requirements for art. Art we create ourselves is a healing experience and this can be done easily by offering lesson plans that promote working with content building, sometimes the students don't even have to know that's what they are doing, so it becomes hidden content building at the end of the discovery is more process and more healing.

A Word to Educators

It was only due to Indigenous knowledge provided by my mentors that had encouraged my growth. Through the encouragement I had become transformed and gifted enough to form an identity. This form of encouragement allowed me to feel confident with my presence as a contributing member to society. I feel the lesson plans will also encourage this style of identity forming. With the website, I offer Indigenous teaching pedagogy, and demonstrate that I can exist within the curriculum structures and it can be put into action to decolonize and promote more Indigenous knowledge's to become legitimized within the school based curriculum structure. Indigenized lesson plans are available and Story Dramas are available with workshop notes from a template made by Barb Hill. Story Dramas have the potential to also revitalize Indigenous Storytelling. I encourage everyone to feel some freedom Indigenous by practicing and, testing the boundaries of contemporary performance space within a classroom to form cultural connections, identity development, shared learning experiences, and the discovery of healing processes.

Performing to Heal Our Hearts

Real ceremonial rituals are fortunately still practiced and lived through the potlatch ban, what I am curios about is what the ritual means to people now in contemporary performance practices in regards to healing? My Grandmother became a pipe carrier, I hear the term ritual being used, appropriated, in performance culture and I find it confusing. I practice spiritual systems and there exists certain spiritual elements I would never call upon for example; the grandfathers and grandmothers of the four directions especially in front of folks who don't understand what that may potentially do, opening gates –spiritual gates might trigger a phenomenon to occur and that's not always a good thing. Certain things however can be

performed in a safe space. People who are Indigenous or Non-Indigenous practice testing the boundaries of contemporary performance space and I feel fusing the systems of practice is being accepted more. Although I will not participate in certain rituals, as I have a protocol, an agreement with my ancestors. Researching the multiple layers of performance practice can help me figure out in a comfortable way- how to restructure them and I ask myself before hand- what can this performance do for my own healing? Transformation comes when certain performances fuels the memory, emotion, fantasy, and desire it also challenges scholarly "literary" forms and performance styles learned by systematic routines. I found organic similarities in the Indigenous ways of knowing and the Performative sense of knowing as they both challenge epistemologies and focus on experiential values. Performance models when rooted in normative culture, imitates the re-telling of a story as told in the book. Indigenous performance is the way of life; the soul embodies a gift given by the ancestors. Telling stories influences people's way of being in this world, the character is affected. With integrity the ceremonies are practiced, the skills become embodied. Cultural rituals existed and are in existence. The spaces provided, maintained the connection, still reinforces ones identity- tribal knowledge is a phenomenon. People broadcast the words in ceremonial ritual of what made sense to them in the moment. The ancestors mapped with rituals so the vibrations could heal our hearts.

Giving the gift of healing our hearts can be facilitated in a workshop type called Story Drama, in the story drama workshops I have developed for the website and for my practice I believe they do support healing, empowerment, and community building. Graveline.J.F Circle Works (1998,pg.169) *When an experience becomes a story, it is passed on, given away, made sacred. Pain and rage can be* released, *isolation celebrated. What singular experience becomes woven into a larger context*. (Starhawk 1987:123)

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