

Crossing the boundaries into Indigenous teaching and learning: Emerging cross-cultural pedagogy in teacher education

Paper submitted for presentation at AERA Annual conference, April 10, 2007

Abstract

Cross-cultural dialogue is key in the movement towards post-secondary curriculum reform in teacher education. At the University of Victoria, a series of Indigenous pedagogy courses for educators creates a space for primarily Western educated participants to examine their own cultural assumptions and explore Indigenous ways of teaching and learning. The courses serve as a model for cross-cultural dialogue through hands-on Indigenous projects, such as carving and weaving. Early stage research findings will be discussed including the Indigenous concepts of *cwelelep* (being in a place of dissonance, uncertainty and anticipation); *watchful listening* (paying deep attention beyond our personal understandings); *celhcelh* (being responsible for our own learning); and *kamucwkalha* (the energy indicating an emergence of group purpose).

Introduction

The 2007 AERA convention calls for a broadened perspective of research that looks outside of the United States to extend educational inquiry “beyond the traditional boundaries of our field” and that “applies novel methods to educational problems” (Baker & Koretz, 2006, p.30). A new effort in the Faculty of Education, at the University of Victoria, in British Columbia, Canada does just that. The research revolves around a series of courses that immerses educators in Indigenous pedagogy through traditional hands-on experiences such as pole carving or weaving.

The unusual courses support post-secondary curriculum reform by opening an avenue for cross-cultural dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous participants. The courses work to positively change individual and societal cultural perceptions and misconceptions. Furthermore, they highlight the potential and value of Indigenous teaching and learning approaches for educational organizations. As the conference call suggests, educational quality should be defined as more than test scores and should include strengthening student learning through varied and diverse approaches. The pedagogy that

underlies the Indigenous courses holds such a holistic perspective. This paper highlights research that takes a closer look at the educational experiences of pre-service teachers enrolled in these courses.

Description of the Courses

Cross-cultural dialogue between Indigenous and Non-Indigenous educators serves to strengthen our schools and communities by drawing a new vision of the future through the interaction of divergent epistemologies. Canadian educator Yatta Kanu (2003) suggests that we are at a historic point that demands a culturally combined approach to curriculum reform, “where relations are no longer unidirectional or univocal, flowing from the colonialist to the colonized” (p. 79). She notes that, “there is no longer a single set of discourse about progress and change” and puts forward the ideas of postcolonial theorist Homi Bhabha’s idea of a ‘third space’ “where local and global images meet in a weaving that has its own configurations and implications” (p. 77). This is a space where unequal cultural power can mix and shift.

To contribute to this balancing process, there is much need for authentic Indigenous learning experiences that are built on the integrity of authentic Indigenous ways. The courses described here attempt to fully place Indigenous ways of learning and teaching within a university setting. Despite the challenge of underlying cultural differences such as university time schedules, marking and student expectations, the courses have been remarkably successful.

The Indigenous pedagogy courses are interactive learning communities offered to student teachers, educators, faculty members, students from other disciplines, as well as members of the larger community. Within the courses students experience the principles of traditional Indigenous ways of teaching and learning including: mentorship and apprenticeship learning; learning by doing; learning by deeply observing; learning through listening; telling stories and singing songs; learning in a community; and learning by sharing and providing service to the community.

The courses integrate hands-on practical activities with theoretical and academic objectives. The overall goal is to gain understanding of Indigenous ways of teaching and learning by directly experiencing the process. In one course this came about through the

group carving of a traditional Lekwungen and Liekwelthout Thunderbird house and welcoming pole (referred to in this writing as “the pole course”). A second course revolved around the creation of fabrics and textiles including the media of weaving, buckskin, beadwork, cedar bark, button blankets, and wool (referred to in this writing as “the earth fibres course”). A more implicit, but equally important goal of both the courses is that of modeling an Indigenous curriculum within the university context.

Description of Research

The research that is currently taking place will describe in depth the experience of the pre-service teachers who were enrolled in the second course entitled, *Earth Fibres Weaving Stories: Indigenous Ways of Teaching and Learning*. It attempts to understand the experiences of the course participants by recording their stories and analyzing them through the lens of a combined narrative and phenomenological approach. In this way, light will be shed on some of the essential characteristics of the experiences within the course. Additionally, the students have been followed into their teaching practicum experience to see how the course experience may be actualized outside of the Indigenous course context.

Phenomenological analysis of the data will highlight emergent themes including concepts such as: *cwelelep* (being in a place of dissonance, uncertainty and anticipation); *watchful listening*; *celhcelh* (responsibility for our own learning); *watchful listening* (paying deep attention beyond our personal understandings); and *kamucwkalha* (the energy that indicates an emergence of a group sense of purpose). The stories gathered in this research can be shared with educators and teacher educators to inform their practice of both Indigenous and cross-cultural teaching and learning. The research will provide a descriptive overview of the student teacher experience in the courses and also document the shifting perspectives and teacher capacity (Kanu, 2006) of the participants in the course. Research questions include: What self-reported changes in attitudes, values, and beliefs about learning and teaching occur, if any? When significant learning incidents do occur, how are they experienced and are they actualized beyond the context of this course? Specifically, are these experiences incorporated into the classroom experience as these pre-service teachers continue on into their teaching practicum within the public schools?

Data collection is in the final stage and involves 12 elementary level pre-service teachers who were enrolled in the earth fibres course. The participants have just completed a practicum field-placement within the public schools. The participants have engaged in two interviews (at the beginning and conclusion of the course) and have participated in a post-practicum focus group. Additional data include: interviews with the participating Indigenous Elders; photo and film images taken during the course; students' written reflective assignments; and my own journal writing and observations as a participant observer (Spradley, 1980).

Interpretation of the data will be to some extent unusual and emergent, in that the qualitative approaches used must be continuously verified for consistency with decolonizing methods (Smith, 1999; Struthers & Peden-McAlpine, 2005). Overall, analysis will be informed by a phenomenological narrative approach (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000; Thomas & Polio, 2002) that makes meaning of the stories of the pre-service teachers within the context of the course and the broader context of the university and public school environments. Emergent themes will be compared across all data sources for validity, thus creating an extensive, multi-dimensional picture of the pre-service teacher experience. The next phase of in-depth analysis will involve the use of a qualitative software program such as NVivo7.

This research stems from the authors' experience in the pole course – the first course offered in Indigenous ways of learning and teaching. While no formal research took place in that course, extensive reflection and writing occurred in conjunction with four pre-service teachers who were enrolled. The current work is informed by the insightful and honest writing of these young scholars (Tanaka, Williams, Benoit, Duggan, Moir & Scarrow, 2006). The framework for this paper was based in the pole course experiences, but is now being shaped by the initial stage analysis of the data gathered in the earth fibres course. In-depth data analysis, the next phase of the project, promises to develop a rich picture of how the participants are shifting their perspectives on learning and teaching as a result of the course.

Significance

The significance of this research is three-fold. *First*, it will illuminate the

relationship between immersion into Indigenous pedagogy and increased teacher capacity among pre-service teachers, due to shifting understandings of the learning and teaching process. This will potentially provide insight into how teacher education programs can encourage effective ways of teaching in multi-cultural classrooms. *Second*, it will shed light on the benefits of Indigenous ways of teaching and learning in their own right. This can inform curriculum implementation within the field of curriculum development. *Third*, the work will expand understanding of research methodologies that link two distinct cultural approaches to inquiry. Applied across disciplines, decolonizing methods could have significant impact in academic research with both Indigenous and non-Indigenous populations.

Multi-leveled Dialogue

The remnants of North America's colonial past continue on today, and cultural favouritism occurs too often in how schools and universities are organized and how learning and teaching occurs within them (Marker, 2004; Menzies, Archibald & Smith, 2004). Indigenous ways of knowing are beginning to emerge in mainstream pedagogical dialogues but their significance is yet to be fully appreciated by the dominant culture (Battiste & Henderson, 2000). To gain a more balanced cross-cultural awareness and create educational programs that reflect that balance, dialogue becomes essential (Hooks, 1994; Isaacs, 1999). Westerners rarely have an opportunity to reflect on and appreciate that their way of learning and the content of what they learn is privileged. When embedded as a member of a dominant culture everything is designed to fit one's own cultural world. From this position of relative comfort, it is difficult to even notice that there are people who might have a different approach, or a different way of thinking. By reflecting and dialoguing on "taken for granted" perspectives of teaching and learning, individuals can begin to shed light on cultural influences and biases, and the tight grip on dominant beliefs begins to unravel.

This is particularly relevant in adult educational settings (Vella, 2002). But how do educators interpret what it means to be in dialogue with someone? What are the implications of dialoguing with another? In the book, *A Pedagogy for Liberation*:

Dialogues on Transforming Education (Shor & Freire, 1987), Paulo Freire describes dialogue as being rooted in our historical past:

...dialogue must be understood as something taking part in the very historical nature of human beings. It is part of our historical progress in becoming human beings. That is, dialogue is a kind of necessary posture to the extent that humans have become more and more critically communicative beings. Dialogue is a moment where humans meet to reflect in their reality as they make and remake it (p. 98).

In this sense, dialogue is an important bridge from our past that leads to future possibilities. The Indigenous pedagogy courses are an occasion for multi-layered dialogues to occur. Within such dialogue lies the opportunity for change based in cross-cultural awareness.

It should be noted that the dialogue described in this research is a non-linear process. Not only does it exist in a temporal context that is different than typical Western notions, it is dialogue that draws from more than spoken conversation. The experiential nature of the course – for example, working with cedar bark that has been stripped from the surface of ancient trees – provides participants with ways to listen to culture through embodied knowledge (Lakoff & Johnson, 1999). The stories of the Indigenous instructors enable participants to attend to the voices of the ancestors. Additionally, individual reflection (conversation with ourselves) also comes into play. The following principles that underlie participant dialogue should be seen in this same non-linear light.

Cwelelep: dissonance, uncertainty and anticipation

Being in dialogue with someone from another culture requires the listener to encounter the existence of the unknown. For the L'ilwat, this place of dissonance and uncertainty is called *cwelelep*. While it is uncomfortable, it is also a place of anticipation of new learning. We return to the words of Freire:

To the extent that we are communicative beings who communicate to each other as we become more able to transform our reality, we are able to *know that we know*, which is something *more* than just knowing...and we human beings know also that *we don't know*. Through dialogue, reflecting together on what we know and don't know, we can then act critically to transform reality (p. 99).

This *knowing that we don't know* is a significant part of the experience within the Indigenous pedagogy courses. Embedded in the context of a Western focused university, participants come to the courses with a pre-conceived set of expectations of how the class will proceed. Soon, it becomes apparent that assumptions about teaching and learning have to be suspended and each student will have to be open to unfamiliar pedagogical possibilities. Laura, one of the student teachers enrolled in the pole course, explains:

The very first day of this class I felt an energy present that was different from any I'd felt in a class before. We started off in a circle, facing each other. We discussed what we would be doing in the class, but not the ultimate goal – aside from the completion of the protection pole... There was no outline, no list of things to get done, no break-down of mini assignments and projects. It was scary, and it would be a while until I would see that it was actually liberation. To me, this was a completely new approach to learning and teaching. As a teacher, I can't help but to be challenged to develop an understanding of this approach, especially as it has transformed my own opinions and perspectives. The lack of rules calls me to draw from the knowledge within myself and to build on it (in Tanaka, Williams, Benoit, Duggan, Moir & Scarrow, 2006).

As a Non-indigenous, Western-educated emerging teacher, Laura was struggling with new and unfamiliar ways of learning and teaching. The perspectives she was familiar with, based in our collective colonial past, were being challenged. As the course proceeded, there were many discussions about this uncomfortable experience. Many of the participants were experiencing the same disconcerted feelings. As Laura said, it would take time for their understandings of new ways of learning to begin to shift.

Watchful Listening: beyond personal knowing

Along with the uncertain experience of *cwelelep*, the pre-service teachers engaged in a *watchful listening* process to hear what was different about Indigenous cultural perspectives on learning and teaching. Becoming watchful listeners was a difficult process as described by Robyn in the pole course:

When a question arose for me I would, as usual, take that question to one of our class leaders. Instead of receiving my usual quick and perfunctory answer I often

received a story. These stories were enthralling, but often circular, ending near the beginning and missing an obvious answer to my question. Often when a leader was finished, I would think to myself, 'well that's great, but where is my answer?' I grew frustrated and discouraged when I was not handed the answer on a platter. The concept of waiting it out, watching and observing was completely foreign to me. I understood I was learning in a way of a different culture, but I still could not handle how different it was from my own. This led to mounting frustration towards myself. I was unable to comprehend my inability to adapt. I chastised myself for not being able to wait, slow down and just listen. All I was after was a quick fix, and that fact upset me. (in Tanaka, Williams, Benoit, Duggan, Moir & Scarrow, 2006).

Robyn's frustration at learning to be a watchful listener reflects her temporary inability to look beyond the familiar model of teaching and learning that she grew up with. Many participants in both classes reiterated experiencing this same occurrence. It reflects a reliance on a transmissive model of education where students such as Robyn, expect information to be passed "on a silver platter," that is, without assuming full responsibility for the learning process. Robyn's distress in not being able to understand a new way appears to have, at least temporarily, obscured the "anticipation of new learning" phase of cwelelep. The process required time in an uncomfortable place before a changing perspective could enable deeper learning to occur.

Celhcelh: personal responsibility for learning

Alongside of watchful listening, the pre-service teachers began to gradually become responsible for their own learning, a process that is termed *celhcelh*, by the L'ilwat people. Yvonne tells us about her perspective that has, again, been heavily influenced by a North American transmissive perspective of learning and teaching:

My education has been spoon fed to me. From childhood, I have been told what to know, what to believe, and how to act. When this class began, I opened my mouth to receive my spoonful of knowledge, yet I found no spoon. I found myself confused, not knowing what to do. I asked questions, because that is how I have always been told to find answers. Again, I found nothing. Over time I came to see that while questions would not be automatically answered, answers did exist. This

Aboriginal approach to education suggested that finding them was my responsibility. I was suddenly, for the first time, responsible for my own learning in an educational setting. Upon this recognition, I closed my mouth and opened my eyes and ears. I took advantage of every opportunity to learn. I didn't just watch, I observed. I didn't just listen, I heard. I wanted to learn. I wanted to understand the purpose of all this – I wanted to understand what I was being told. The potential of discovery of the answers I sought, intrigued me. Motivated me (in Tanaka, Williams, Benoit, Duggan, Moir & Scarrow, 2006).

Coming into an awareness of their own ability to learn was a powerful and common experience for students in both courses over time. Through their personal experiences as learners they began to translate this into how they would change their role as teacher. In her Earth Fibres reflection assignment, Jamie explains how a deeper understanding of celhcelh, will affect her teaching:

As a teacher, I want my students to take pride in their work and to be motivated by a want to learn rather than by grades. I don't want my students to compromise the quality of their work for time, but to instead enjoy the process of creating something. Building a community and sense of family in my classroom is going to be very important to me as a beginning teacher. I want all of my students to feel welcomed, accepted, understood, and respected. (Our instructor) spoke of an energy one gets when one is poised to learn something, but unfortunately we (Westerners) have no word for it.

It is interesting that Jamie recognizes the lack of expression within the English language for a concept that is critical in the learning process. The word that Jamie is searching for is embedded in the meaning of the L'ilwat term, cwelelep. Being poised towards anticipation of learning hints at the “potential of discovery” that Yvonne refers to in her previous quote. This motivates the learner, as Jamie states, to “enjoy the process” leading to a deeper sense of celhcelh – a responsibility towards learning that transcends external motivators.

Kamucwkalha: noticing community energy

One strong theme that is emerging in this research is that of community.

Kamucwkalha is the act of noticing the energy of a group that indicates an attunement and

emerging group purpose. In the pole course, this became apparent on the day that the pole was moved from the outside workspace to a more weather protected space inside. Because of the considerable weight of the pole, this was no small feat and required the involvement of all the course participants. Swinging sledgehammers, opening doors, moving small logs under the pole to act as wheels, watching the overall direction of the moving mass, each took different but equally important skills to accomplish our goal. By that point in the semester, individuals had begun to find the jobs that they were drawn to and had increased their skill levels at these jobs. It could be said that they found their inner directed learning capacity, and as this happened, the group as a whole unit appeared to be solidifying with a stronger sense of community.

Developing community was frequently expressed by the participants as a critical factor in the learning experiences they had within the courses. Jenni writes in her final reflection assignment:

One thing that struck me most in this class was the sense of community among the students and teachers. By bringing the group together in the beginning (of each class) to say prayers, thanksgivings, thoughts, and ideas, it really opened people up to one another in a way that is not possible in other education classes. I felt I got to know people at a deeper level than otherwise possible. Classmates were supportive and encouraging of other people's work. There was no sense of competition, which is such a relief after three years of competing for grades.

Getting to know people at a deeper level appears to be a significant factor in how the student teachers' notions of learning evolve, and requires deeper analysis in the next phase of the research process.

Jenni's reference to the building of community between students and teachers is also particularly noteworthy. This happened in part, because the course was offered on a pass/fail basis – many participants speak to the critical importance of this. But there was also an underlying philosophy amongst the course instructors that knowledge was not an object to be transferred, rather, each student would seek out and find the learning that was appropriate to them. This acknowledgement set up a dynamic of power that gave equal respect to the learner and the teacher. It is not to say that the instructors felt that they don't

hold important knowledge, but that possession of knowledge, or lack thereof, doesn't change the simple notion that everyone deserves respect equally.

Shifting Perspectives of Learning and Teaching

Based on initial analysis, it appears that many of the student teachers enrolled in the earth fibres course have experienced shifts in their perspectives of the nature of learning and that this will in turn affect how they believe they should behave as teachers. Until the in-depth data analysis is complete it is impossible to address this in the manner that it deserves. However, a few glimpses at comments made in the student's final reflection assignment for the earth fibres course, shed light on what is potentially to be found in the next phase of the research. Jamie writes:

From this course I have gained a better understanding of what it means to learn by mentorship, apprenticeship, by doing, by deeply observing, by listening, by telling stories, by singing songs, by being a member of a team, by sharing, and by providing a service. Working in my button blanket group with Gina engaged me in all of these ways of learning and I have gained an appreciation for each one. As a student I can see the benefits of having multiple ways of learning for people with different learning styles, and as a teacher I plan to implement as many into my daily classroom teaching as I can. I have learned so much about myself, about learning, and about teaching along this journey and can't wait to pass it on. Our final button blanket was beautiful and I can finally say that I am proud to show off something I worked so hard on to create with a group of people I can call my family.

Jamie speaks to the experience of participants growing awareness of how they learn as individuals within a different educational environment. Kim articulates more clearly how this can extend into her role as a teacher:

Another important principle that I will take away from this course is the appreciation for other ways of learning. Of course, as a future teacher, I have always been aware that every student learns differently. Upon reflection after this course however, I realize that it goes beyond the needs of individual learners. As a

teacher, I need to be open to ways of learning and teaching that are different from what I have experienced.

There is clearly a desire in these young teachers to carry what they have learned in the Indigenous courses with them to “pass it on” through changes in their own teaching style. It is refreshing to hear a teacher who is willing to change her teaching methods, when so often it is assumed that it is the students who must adapt. Initial review of the focus group discussion indicates that to varying degrees, it was possible for the participants to enact change in their respective teaching roles.

Future Directions of the Research

Deeper analysis of the data will reveal more about how the attitudes and beliefs of the pre-service teachers have shifted, and how they were able to actualize their learning from the Indigenous course within the limited context of their established classroom practicum environment. It is expected that the above themes will be illuminated in more depth, and that multiple new themes of the pre-service experience will be identified and analyzed. These appear to fall into the three main categories of teacher development (capacity), environmental factors, and curriculum design and implementation. They include, but are not limited to the role of sharing circles; the concept of using “good hands” (intent); infusion of Indigenous ways throughout the curriculum; giving learners more choices; creating space for learner’s personal stories; spiritual knowing; creating community and welcoming environments; developing patience as a teacher; conscious reflection; and building teacher authenticity with students.

Plans for future studies include follow-up interviews with the participants of both the pole and earth fibres courses in two to three years, after they have been teaching in their own classrooms. It is expected that these new teachers will have been able to actualize their learning from the Indigenous experience to varying degrees, and likely in a variety of ways. Through such a study, the long-term effects of the Indigenous courses can be portrayed. Combined with the findings of the current study, this can have significant impact with teacher educators in our attempt to develop programs that assist student teachers in becoming effective educators in the continuously growing cross-cultural classrooms of North America.

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