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A Personal Story of Teaching Aboriginal Art as a Non-Aboriginal Person

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Abstract

This is an autoethnographic reflection of teaching Aboriginal art as a non-Aboriginal person. Over a period of ten months, a class of grade seven students was led through an inquiry into Aboriginal art including research and the creation of individual and group art pieces. The evolving curriculum was shaped by considerations of respect for individuals or groups, working with partial knowledge, as well as personal stories and histories. New perspectives emerge through re-examination of this experience through a metaphor of walking and wandering. This autoethnographic treatment explores approaches for teaching in unfamiliar territories of cultural difference and acknowledges complicated conversations along the way.

Introduction

This article is an autoethnographic reflection of teaching Aboriginal art as a non-Aboriginal person. Its purpose is to further discussion of Aboriginal education in the context of the public school system while upholding self-determination of Aboriginal people. I am a fourth generation descendant of European settlers to North America. For the past ten years, I worked as a public school teacher for the North Vancouver School District (NVSD) in British Columbia (BC). Over a period of ten months, I facilitated a class of grade seven students throughout an inquiry into Aboriginal art including research and the creation of individual and group art pieces. The process was a collaboration with Tsleil-Waututh visual artist Rosie Dapp. Rosie was employed as an Aboriginal support worker. She divided her time between numerous classrooms to give extra support to Aboriginal students.

Approximately one third of my students were of Aboriginal, Tsleil-Waututh ancestry. The area currently known as North Vancouver is on the traditional ancestral unceded territory of the Coast Salish people, the Musqueam, the Squamish, and the Tsleil-Waututh. Focusing on Aboriginal art created opportunity for the Tsleil-Waututh students to express their own cultural identity in a public school setting. It also raised awareness of issues of cultural difference in the intimate space of our classroom.

The BC Ministry of Education common curriculum is placeless and impersonal in its universality. Curricular prescription to include Indigenous worldview and perspectives manifests according to specific educator initiatives. Further, Indigenous knowledge and ways of knowing are confined to the traditional Western frameworks of place and time within the public school setting. The physical construction of the classroom and the imposed daily schedule define the parameters of educational experience.

The purpose of this paper is to give an account of my experiences teaching Aboriginal art as a non-Aboriginal person. This reflective process has allowed me to consider authentic, meaningful, and respectful ways of teaching as a cultural outsider. Engaging in teaching and learning with Aboriginal knowledge and ways of knowing has meant attention to ongoing relationships as well as relaxing the constraints of traditional Western public school curricular structures. This process has required entering unknown territories and becoming conscious of my own partial knowledge.

Described briefly, the Aboriginal art projects were (1) a pocket-story study of shapes in oil pastel, (2) an individual animal study in acrylic paint on board, and (3) a group mural of local Aboriginal images and geography in acrylic paint on board. I also entered into a relationship with NVSD, who granted funds to cover the materials for our mural and a class visit to the

University of British Columbia Museum of Anthropology (MOA) through their Aboriginal Education Enhancement Agreement programming.

Methodology

Through a process of reflection and writing I have woven a discussion that allows the events that unfolded throughout the year to be seen as a whole and to be seen in relationship to one another. Autoethnography, a qualitative research methodology, guides and informs this study. “*Autoethnography* refers to writing about the personal and its relationship to culture” (Ellis, 2004, p. 52).

Cultural theorist Irit Rogoff (2002) writes about working with cultural difference. She uses the terms “gaps” and “absences” to describe the histories that cannot be undone and the cultural differences these histories create. Rogoff describes a process of working with awareness of gaps and absences. This involves a constant challenge of our own assumptions (p. 64). Autoethnography provides space for a conscious reflection of my own position and assumptions in relation to culture and history within the school and social environment. “As a form of ethnography, autoethnography overlaps art and science; it is part *auto* or self and part *ethno* or culture. It also is something different from both of them, greater than its parts” (Ellis, 2004, p.47).

I did not plan to teach Aboriginal art before the school year began. It was something that evolved. The metaphor of walking or wandering describes the process through which several art projects were developed and carried out. Metaphor and metonymy are two renderings of the research approach *a/r/tography* (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004), I chose to write about my experiences within that perspective. As well, using this model for curriculum development enabled me to engage with Rosie as a teaching partner and to consider the cultural and personal differences within my classroom.

“*A/r/tography* is a hybrid form of practice-based research within education and the arts” (Gouzouasis, Irwin, Miles, & Gordon, 2013, p. 3). Becoming an *a/r/tographer* means to develop a practice/praxis that includes being artist, researcher and teacher. By creating a reflective and reflexive narrative of my teaching experiences, my experiences become research. My research informs my teaching practice/praxis. Teaching goes beyond the moment and beyond the classroom when it is attached to people and to story. For me, this process of enrichment will return to my classroom as a continuum.

Setting Out

This project started in walking, in transit between one place and the next. I went for a walk with Rosie. We were in the halls of the school. As a teacher I am constantly walking. I could have been between my class and the staff room, Rosie could have been between the staff room and the primary playground, and we met and walked together. In this crack between the scheduled and the defined a seed was planted. She had an art idea. Was I interested? This is the kind of moment that teachers constantly find in their exploration of the school landscape. I said yes and took a step forward.

John Stligoe (1998) writes of students' uneasiness at a lack of topic schedule in his university courses on exploration (p. 3). It seems to me that there is a difficulty and a tension that arises when education is approached as a process, a direction, and an undefined product. To me, the individual seems exposed. The value system seems challenged. By allowing a relaxation of schedule and topic and sitting with the tension of uncertainty in an educational setting, instructors and students are presented with the immediate.

I see a discomfort for educators in teaching unfamiliar subject matter. It is especially difficult to lead when knowledge is connected to cultural identity that is not one's own. A non-Aboriginal educator teaching Aboriginal knowledge and ways of knowing risks exposing their own ignorance and entering into negotiation of personal relationships that take into account cultural differences. It is safer to avoid teaching what one does not know. "This paralysis can come about due to fear of 'getting it wrong' or negative cross-cultural encounters and experiences" (Barnes, 2013, p.2). The danger of avoidance is of suppression of diverse histories and narratives of the students and educators.

Stilgoe points to the importance of having space to follow "leads" as leads arise in a learning environment (p. 3). I chose to follow Rosie's lead and explore Aboriginal art. As a teacher, I was relaxing my topic schedule. I felt comfortable with this in part due to the relationship between Rosie and myself and our mutual love of visual art. I also believe that it is important to follow students' leads. It is validating their explorations. "Creative persons live in a state of constant search and exploration" (McNiff, 1998, p. 69). As we encourage students to become creative, it is necessary to relax spatial and temporal parameters and enable them to make the (s)p(1)ace (de Cosson, 2004). This allows for diverse cultural histories, narratives, and identities to surface.

The process of the children creating their pocket story art project started slowly and meandered through several stages. Completed pocket story art projects consisted of an oil pastel on black construction paper drawing with a written story folded inside of a hidden pocket (see Figure 1). Rosie introduced the concept of story as it is embodied in all art. She

presented the students with a collection of art images by Aboriginal artists. The instructions were for the students to find an image or part of an image from those presented to which they felt drawn. They spent time looking at the artwork and waited for a moment of interest or connection before proceeding. Although I had done similar things myself, I was never brave enough to try this approach with my students. I guess that I was afraid students wouldn't buy into this process. In this case, Rosie emphasized the connection part of the work and the students took it to heart. She also showed similar pocket-story artwork that she had completed herself. After the students had chosen an image, they were invited to write about why they liked or felt connected to that image. Attention to students' personal narratives meant allowing time for individual processes.

Pockets were built by gluing a small piece of black construction paper onto a larger, eighteen inch square of black construction paper. The pockets blended into the background. Some students built small envelopes instead of pockets. Next, the paper and the pockets were covered with oil pastel drawing in which the chosen parts of art were reproduced and changed into a new piece of art. In this way they were building a visual story, a personal link to the original artwork. Finally, the written narratives were embedded into their artwork by folding them and placing them in the pockets.

Taking the time to find personal individual connection prepares students for authentic expression of their own interpretations and ideas. As well, having students spend longer on visually developing a personal narrative as an extension of research can act as inspiration for storytelling (Karr, 2011). This project enabled students to explore the ideas of personal stories in art, and of sharing and transforming stories in both a visual and written manner. It allowed students to explore Aboriginal art in a way that focused on personal connection.



Figure 1. Pocket story art project, property of author.

Meandering and Exploring

Meandering is the opposite of the way we are taught to teach children in schools. Teachers are expected to keep students from straying off the path and to keep a steady pace. While these methods are necessary to achieve very specific goals, I know that sometimes, achieved goals can seem empty if the path to them is rushed and immediately forgotten. Allowing time for meandering as a teacher means to engage curiosity, discovery, and invention.

Rebecca Solnit (2000) writes about wandering and straying outside. She points out, “wandering in a book or a computer takes place within more constricted and less sensual parameters” (p. 10). A school is somewhere between a book and the outdoors. I love the art room with its open space and large scattered tables. Back in the classroom, desks are crammed together in tight lines. This conventional arrangement suggests that it is okay to stray and wander in art, but not so much so in other subjects like math, literature, social studies, and science. Perhaps it is for this reason, that I first included Aboriginal knowledge and ways of knowing in art before any other subject.

Over the weeks of working together on the pocket-story study, Rosie and I had a chance to talk in layered snippets about other ideas for art projects with these students. We decided that

our next project would be to have them paint animals on twelve inch square pieces of plywood. Again, personal connections guided our plans. Rosie knew someone who worked at a lumberyard and could cut the wood for us. I knew someone who manufactured acrylic paints. I discovered that there was funding for the materials available through NVSD as an Aboriginal arts initiative.

To begin the next art project, Rosie brought medicine cards to the children and invited them each to select a one. Students turned over their cards to reveal an image of an animal. Based on Aboriginal belief systems, the animals act as guides, inspiration, and healers. (Sams & Carson, 1999). Rosie spoke of the significance of the medicine cards for herself and of the learning through accepting and working with the animal that chooses you. We then asked students to create a painting of animals that represented themselves. The steps included drawing with pencil and then painting with acrylic on their boards. This was difficult for some students who did not immediately identify with their animal card. For example, one boy picked an ant card but painted a puffin instead. He later added some ants to the bottom of his painting. All of the pieces of artwork that were created were formed through students' attempts to visually express personal identity.

Before proceeding with the painting, we strayed onto side paths to further investigate our subject matter. I shared some of my own research and knowledge regarding Aboriginal artists from BC. We watched *Bill Reid*, a video about the well-known Haida artist (Jacques, Johnson, Taylor & Long, 1979). I also gave students photocopies of artwork from *The Last Voyage of the Black Ship* by Michael Nicholl Yahgulanaas (2002). Yahgulanaas is a contemporary Haida artist who creates Japanese style manga blended with traditional Haida art. We compared the use of traditional shapes and forms such as ovoids, u-forms, and s-forms in both artists' work. As well, we discussed the use of surrealist style and colour in recent artwork by Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptan who is of Coast Salish and Okanagan descent (Alteen, Duffek, Lippard, Turner & Willard, 2016). I included the way he called his work "salvation art" for its attention to issues of settler land colonization (Townsend-Gault, 1995, p. 7).

My university education led me to assume that I had the authority to teach these concepts. However, as students engaged personally, and made meaning of Aboriginal art in relation to their own histories and ways of knowing, my ideas of universal concepts and facts were challenged. The presence of Aboriginal voices, were necessary in decolonizing our study of Aboriginal art. As an ally, my role was to uphold Indigenous self-determination (Liamputtong, 2010, p. 22) which includes cultural practice and representation. This approach counters the imperialist notion of gathering and classifying knowledge to be then given back to those whom it is claiming to represent. (Tuhiwai Smith, 2012, p. 31).

Exploring further afield, we went on a class trip to the MOA as a way of finding inspiration for their own painting. I hoped that the research we had done before hand would provide a basic visual literacy for their interpretations at the museum. Becoming aware of cultural and historical significances of symbols was a way of understanding meaning in art (Eiserman, 2005, p. 149).

In hindsight, I realize that I was treating the MOA as the real thing, the cultural event or space, as opposed to an interpretation of it. I was preparing my students for an authentic experience of Aboriginal culture. The confusing part of this situation was that I was bringing Aboriginal students to see representations of Aboriginal culture without acknowledging that it was misplaced or reworked. Honouring student individual interpretations of their museum observations, placing them at the centre was one way to disrupt the authority of the museum presentations (Fritzlan, 2015).



Figure 2. Student work from animal board painting project.

Back at our school, most students were engaged in the design and painting of their boards. Some, however, had a really hard time getting started or completing. In the end, I decided that

it was okay not to finish because that is not what I wanted them to take away. I could not force them to finish a piece of their own art, yet, I realize, I do this all the time in the study of other subjects. I think it has to do with ownership. Art production is a highly personal process, but most people don't see the detached act of doing science that way.

When I think about all the points where I told my students to hurry up or finish their art projects I have a twinge of guilt. The times when students were truly engaged I could tell by the focus of energy and the relaxation of bodies. These corresponded to events that were not limited to time. Flow of creativity was marked by a distorted sense of time, no worry or fear of failure, and distractions being ignored (Csikszentmihalyi, 1996, pp. 112-113). Too often, our sessions in the art room were interrupted by the school bell and the need to re-engage with the rhythm of the rest of our school.

Maps and Trails

Our final project was a mural painted on a five by ten-foot piece of sanded plywood. Rosie and I were both excited about having the students work collaboratively and show their gained knowledge and skill in Aboriginal art. We liked the idea of having the work become a part of the school aesthetic by mounting the mural in a permanent location. For the animals on boards project and final mural I led more and more. Both projects were Rosie's idea but she did not have the time in her work schedule to be with the class to complete them.

As the students finished their individual boards, they began to work on the final mural. One Tsleil-Waututh student designed the central image of Takaya, representing the Wolf Clan. The Tsleil-Waututh people identify as Wolf Clan. I asked a Korean exchange student to design the background. Here I was experimenting, letting go of control to see what her interpretations of our Aboriginal art studies had been in her ten months in Canada. Of course, I ultimately had control to suggest or veto anything.

I have had the good fortune of working with a storyteller from the Tsleil-Waututh Nation, Les George. Les was also employed as an Aboriginal support worker at the school. He told the story of the origins of the Wolf Clan to our whole school at an assembly. I had heard the same story told by Les a few weeks earlier while my class was outdoors on a walk through Sleil-Waututh ancestral lands, Wey-ah-Wichen (Cates Park), in North Vancouver. There was one Tsleil-Waututh student who was not able to come with us on our walk. When I mentioned missing the story, he assured me that he had heard it many times. In this moment, I learned from the student, that the story had a life, a presence, a meaning beyond the walls and schedules of our school.

By the time I heard the story of the Wolf Clan, the final mural project was completed. Rosie had suggested that the wolf (i.e., Takaya) be the focus of the mural. At that time, I knew Takaya only as a symbol. After hearing the story, I looked differently upon the completed mural and realized that many students in my class connected this story to the mural as they painted it. I then realized that my understanding of this mural that I had facilitated had been partial. It made me wonder at all the other partial knowledges I worked with. Working as a teacher with incomplete knowledge or not knowing is uncomfortable in a Western public school curricular landscape. However, this awareness seemed a necessary part of teaching as a cultural outsider.



Figure 3. Final mural class project.

Through my own limited studies, I am most familiar with contemporary Aboriginal artists such as Michael Nicholl Yahgulanaas, Lawrence Paul Yuxweluptun, and Brian Jungen. I presented Yahgulanaas, Yuxweluptun, and Jungen to my students as a way of trying to show them what is happening in the present with Aboriginal art identity. I did this because I thought that while I may have been honoring traditions, I was afraid that I would slip into stereotyping more traditional work and ignoring the living, breathing aspect of art making.

Thomas King (2003) writes about the difficulty of being Native and being trapped in a past presented by media and schools that seemed to be all there was. He tells of the importance of Native people writing their own stories for themselves, as a way of creating a Native present and future (p. 106). This is a difficult territory to negotiate as a teacher in a public school. The project of having students create a mural that was a hybrid or mash-up of all we had

encountered may have allowed for some movement into the present and future. Connecting story and visual art shapes perceptions and allows for multiple voices to be heard.

Walking with Rosie

One day, Rosie and I were outside our school, walking along the side of the gravel field where it gives way to the forest. We were with students taking photographs of the green and grey that glows in the winter moss and sky of North Vancouver woods. I remember that Rosie said to me, as we were walking, that she believed a lot of the Aboriginal students had lost their voice. I took it to mean in the context of the school and both literal and metaphorical. She went on to explain how the experiences of her mother and others in residential schools led to this loss of voice.

Her mother was trained to work in a cannery and to clean. She was taught English. That's all she had when she came out of that school. There had been a loss. Her own voice—the voice of her culture and humanity—had been lost. She did not have language to connect her identity to the culture and family from which she had originated.

Many months later, when I asked Rosie again about this idea of loss of voice in schools for Aboriginal students she spoke about the actual physical voice and the language. Hul'q'umin'um contains guttural sounds, physical formations and actions which Aboriginal children do not use if they do not learn Hul'q'umin'um.

She said, "I can't imagine it. These children were taken from their families as young as four and five years old. And they were punished for speaking their own language. They were made to clean, get down on their hands and knees." She then went on to describe her grandfather's tales of the sisters, the nuns, teaching at the residential school. She laughed at this part of her story, but the word humour doesn't seem apt. The nuns were French Canadian and their English was weak. The nuns would speak in French so that the children didn't know what they were saying.

Rosie tells me that when her own grandparents were together speaking Hul'q'umin'um they would hide it from the children and stop as soon as the kids came into the house. Their parents and aunties and uncles and elders did not want them to learn the language for fear that they would be punished when they spoke it in schools.

I have heard many stories of lives and families damaged or ruined by residential schools from my students and colleagues. A young girl once told me that her grandpa said all schools were bad for you. He had been in a residential school. I struggle with how to reach students who are not encouraged by their families to engage with the schoolwork that I present, and do not buy into my educational programming.

My conversation with Rosie made me appreciate that we had found a visual language to share with each other and the students. I realized that it was vital to bring Aboriginal art into our schools. But, equally or more important was the knowledge, meaning, and ways of connecting to Aboriginal art. I hoped that the projects Rosie and I facilitated would work towards Aboriginal students finding a voice in the public school setting, that it would allow them to know and express themselves as Aboriginal people (Dion & Salamanca, 2014, p. 161).

Conclusions

“How may we trace our way through a pedagogical experience in order to reveal hidden shadows and ghosts of the strong emotions that mark the space and place of classroom?” (Prendergast, et al., 2008, p. 58). Throughout the ten months of teaching Aboriginal art, I wandered and explored new territory, negotiated new terrain, and developed new relationships, but I rarely had time to reflect on the emotional side of teaching and learning. By rambling through memories of my teaching experience, I am able to gain some awareness and contextualization of the cultural significances of teaching Aboriginal art in my class.

This paper is a reflection on an uncharted journey of conversations and events. “This history of walking I am writing can only be partial, an idiosyncratic path traced through them by one walker with much doubling back and looking around” (Solnit, 2000, p. 4). Looking back now, I see threads that allow me to treat several experiences of a school year as a whole. Each project that Rosie and I entered into helped us to reach the beginning of a new project. These projects were conceived through a series of conversations. The relationship that Rosie and I developed and the common love of visual art were the foundations of our work.

As I look back at this year, I see there was a necessity of using an exploratory method of teaching to approach unfamiliar territory. To map out the entire course of Aboriginal art studies at the beginning of the year would have resulted in a superficial and homogenous journey. There was no way for me to know what Rosie could share of her own experience with the students. There was no way for me to know how the students would respond to Rosie and my instructional design. In retrospect, it seems vital to me that the personal life experience of instructors and students always be considered when teaching art and when teaching cultural histories.

Throughout the year questions arose for me regarding my position of authority in teaching Aboriginal art. Also, I questioned the classroom social dynamic that I was influencing by introducing the difference of culture that directly affected these young people. Moreover, I lacked knowledge of the politics that exist between communities within the Aboriginal peoples of this region. I was only able to see the relationship between Aboriginal and

dominant Western culture in North Vancouver. I knew, that in my ignorance, I was lumping together many different cultural stories and symbols under the broad stroke of ‘Aboriginal art.’ I was assuming cultural homogeneity, “superficially generalizing cultural practices” (Broome, 2015, p. 191). When possible, I tried to follow the lead of local Aboriginal community members.

Rosie and I made time to talk and share stories. She shared stories of her mother’s experience at residential school and of her own experiences of school as an Aboriginal person. Hearing these stories has made me question my own approach to teaching children of the Aboriginal community within our school.

As educators, we speak of positive changes with the Aboriginal students in our school in terms of academic improvement, student participation in events and parent involvement. The more I learn of the history of residential schools the more I see an event that has affected the lives of students I work with. Here is an event that will not go away or be undone. There is a loss that will never be recovered. I see the value of Rogoff’s (2002) concept of living and working with the gap can help to articulate differences in this situation. If I do not see the gap, if I am not conscious of the history of residential schools and the remaining effects of them, how can I begin to try to understand and respect the desires and ideas of my Aboriginal students? How can I move beyond my own assumptions?

The students were encouraged to engage personally with each creative process and to have their images tell a story. The visual art enabled stories to emerge that did not have words but were connected to experience. Stó:lō scholar Jo-ann Archibald (2008) writes that storywork “effectively educates the heart, mind, body, and spirit” (p. 10).

Telling the personal story of my teaching practice this past year has truly made me think about the ways that I work, the choices I make. I exercise power in the curriculum that I highlight, the student suggestions I accept and reject, and the stories that I tell and that I hear. More importantly, I have begun to understand the incomplete nature of the knowledge and ways of knowing that I work with in relation to Aboriginal education. Working as a non-Aboriginal teacher to develop culturally conscious and decolonizing education practice requires risk and engagement in relationship. Local experience with and relationship to Indigenous community members are necessary elements of including ontological differences. Non-Indigenous people can engage in a practice of listening and of not knowing (Cameron, 2015). Evolving collaborative teaching, reflective writing, and accepting how much I don’t know have been invaluable tools for me in this process.

Relaxing spatial and temporal structures through an unplanned ongoing series of art projects was one way of disrupting the traditional public school education limits on knowledge and ways of knowing. It was an attempt at “destabilizing dominant ways of knowing the world in order to make room for assertions of Indigenous knowledge” (Hunt, 2014, p. 30).

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About the Author

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