

In Our Collectivity: Teaching, Learning, and Indigenous Voice

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In this article, I consider the efficacy of transformative embodied pedagogies for making space for Indigenous voice and testimony in the classroom. Drawing upon my experiences of teaching women's studies, and as an Indigenous woman who is simultaneously both teaching and learning, I use the concepts of Indigenous voice and One-ness to reflect upon my location as educator within a web of power relations and to argue that Indigenous pedagogies and protocols offer pathways to empowerment for all.

Prior to law school, I attended Malaspina University College's Arts One: First Nations program. As an Indigenous learner, it was there that, perhaps for the first time since elementary school, I was comfortable in a learning environment. We prayed, had Elders-in-Residence, and participated in twice-weekly seminars led by *Umeeek* (Dr. Richard Atleo). I saw institutional respect for Indigenous protocols, worldviews, and epistemologies. At least half of the students were Indigenous; the other half allies. For me, the program and institution were revolutionary. It was like coming home and it was where I found my voice. When I was in Arts One, I fantasized about what it would be like to come back as a teacher.

I got that opportunity a few years after graduating from law school when I was hired to teach Women's Studies 210/211: First Nations Women. At that point, I wasn't even sure I considered myself a feminist. The few women's studies courses that I had taken qualified me for an associate degree but I had taken few upper-level courses. In fact, I'd only taken women's studies classes at the small college I attended prior to Malaspina because no First Nations studies classes were offered. I figured the next best thing to First Nations studies would be women's studies, with its focus on oppression and power dynamics. In the job interview, I laid my educational history bare, including my teaching experience which was diverse but minimal. I'd taught childbirth education, first aid, dance, and baton twirling, but nothing *academic*. Still, my law degree and identity as an Indigenous woman seemed to carry a lot of weight and I was hired. I went on to learn about transformative pedagogies for *learners* and *teachers*.

On the first day of class, I followed Indigenous protocols, acknowledging that the college was situated on Snunneymex territory and properly introduced myself, which included identifying my family and Kwakiutl community. These protocols, which express the value of family and community, provide opportunities to recognize, build, and maintain relationships. They continually reaffirm and strengthen our connections

and are about building One-ness. When students introduce themselves in this fashion, there is further opportunity for building connections². In the very first class I taught, a woman from Bella Bella knew my grandfather and therefore *knew* me. Another student was the sister of someone I'd gone to law school with and, therefore, I *knew* her.

I learned, early on, that it was important for students to see themselves but also that they are seen, recognized, re-cognized, and *known* by others. They accomplish this *knowing* by hearing each other and by coming to see their story as connected to a bigger story.

In *Teaching Community: A Pedagogy of Hope*, bell hooks (2003, p. 30) describes how unusual it is for most white people to listen to a black person (particularly a black woman) speak to them for thirty minutes. Rarely, if ever, are they in situations where they must listen to black women lecture to them. hooks says it never occurred to her to look for black female teachers; she merely accepted this absence. Similarly, most of my students (white or Indigenous) had never before this class had an Indigenous teacher. An important part of my task, then, was to disrupt the *status quo* with my identity, to model, to talk, to stand in front of them as an Indigenous woman, to "offer up my body" for them to learn from (Bannerji, 1995, p. 102), to be the teacher, to be me: an exception to the rule.

Surprisingly, the students were interested in *my* story. I see their bodies attentive [turns out the dance-teacher experience was actually useful] as I tell them I was expelled from high school and, like many of them, was admitted to college as a mature student (at the age of 36). I tell them my favourite foods are dried salmon and *ooligan* grease, that I have my grandmother's name, *Lakwaloqua* (meaning *calling the people to feast with her*), and that I'm a lawyer practicing Aboriginal law. They have respect for what it takes to get a law degree. Also, they seem to have faith in lawyers and think, as I once did, that we are capable of performing miracles. And even *with* all the first-time nervousness—the feeling that I know nothing, that I am an imposter—I notice I feel safer standing here in this room in front of 32 strangers than I did most of the time when was a student. I know that with my fair skin and law degree I embody privilege, but at the same time, I identify as Indigenous; I am one of them. I am home.

On the first day, I explained to the students that I wouldn't be doing a whole lot of teaching. I told them that I considered part of my role would be to help create space for their own stories, that I was more like a facilitator and, that as an individual, I didn't know very much compared to what we know together. *In our collectivity, what we know together is astounding.*

I said this because I believe it to be true. While working as chief negotiator for the Kwakiutl Nation, I often reflected on the significance of collectivity because I could see how both the British Columbia (BC) Treaty Process and the *Indian Act* had been used to separate territories and peoples. *What we are in our collectivity is huge. We're pathetic on our*

own. Also, this idea of strength in our collectivity is something I've felt in the *guxii* during Kwakwaka'wakw ceremonies when all our communities are present.

Everything is One

An unarticulated goal in my class was *One-ness*. I say *unarticulated* because, while I've felt this *One-ness* in my classes, I've only recently come to see it as an educational objective. My grandfather used to say in his broken English, "We one. We all one." He frequently made these pronouncements during conversations about conflict (between government and First Nations, such as Oka; or inter-tribal conflict; or family feuds) and he and others said it enough that I came to realize its importance.

As a pedagogical consideration, I had no word to describe it. Sometimes after a class, I'd go home and tell my husband the day's class *really came together or felt really good*. Sometimes I noticed this *One-ness* energy in the middle of the semester, but more often it appeared near the end of the term. Once or twice, it didn't arrive until the very last day of class and one year it wasn't there at all. Years later, I learned from Lorna Williams (2006, p. 3) the Li'wat term, *Kumucwalha*, "the recognition of our having a common goal, of being present to self and others, of everyone feeling as though they belong". But back then, I didn't really focus on my role as a teacher in actively encouraging it, or about why *One-ness* is important in the teaching and learning environment. I thought it came by accident or luck, or that it was something out of my control all together. Now I know differently.

As a learner, I've been positively affected by *One-ness* energy and I realize there are ways as teachers (or facilitators or members of communities) that we can consciously assist each other in finding and developing *One-ness* so, as a community, we can move forward together in a good way. In a classroom, finding *One-ness* means working together, building respect, enhancing relationships, and recognizing coalitions. One particular element for developing *One-ness* in the class was through making space for Indigenous (women's) voices, my own, and those of the students.

I knew that in making space—not *demands*—for their stories, I was walking a fine line between asking them to be *native informants* and between giving them the opportunity to be heard. Mimi Orner (1992) argues that such demands for student voice are oppressive because they perpetuate relations of domination. Orner (1992, p. 77) says that as educators who are concerned with "changing unjust power relations [we] must continually examine our assumptions about our own positions, those of our students, the meanings and uses of student voices, our power to call for students to speak and our often unexamined power to legitimate and perpetuate unjust relations in the name of student empowerment". As a student and sometimes the lone Indigenous student, I had been put in the uncomfortable position of being expected to be the encyclopedia of Cana-

dian Indians. This context was different. For one thing, Indigenous students often made up 50% of my class, but also the presence of the Arts One program itself, and the unabashed institutional support for these courses, created a vital "context for counter-narrative" (hooks, 2003, p. 3). Also, early on, we'd read and discussed Chrystos' poem, "I Am Not Your Princess," which validates the discomfort of being asked to "represent" in spite of the fact that we don't know the "names of all the tribes or can pronounce names [we've] never heard"; we only know "how to make fry bread" (1988, p. 66). Learning is powerful "when [our] experience is recognized as central and significant" (hooks, 1994, p. 37), for example, as it is mirrored through literature and poetry³. Additionally, though, this was radically different because there were times when, as a student, I had wanted to talk but couldn't because there was no space, or because often I'd waited too long for my turn. Possibly, the Kwakwaka'wakw rule of *No Diving For Money at Potlatches*, of not wanting to look hungry or needy, translated in the classroom as *Let the others speak/be taken care of first*.

As my friend Johnny says:

Many of us come to school confused and unconfident. We do not know our own voice, and finding it in the academy is a painful process. Many of us have spent years insulating ourselves from the outside world. Racism and our sense of inferiority has many of us working to conceal our own voice, and trying to appropriate a more accepted voice. (Mack, 2008)

To be sure, for Indigenous students there are few opportunities for authenticity and lots of good reasons to stay silent. Sometimes it is a matter of safety.

Generally, my classes were a mixture of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous women and men; however, my focus here is primarily on the Indigenous voice. While essentializing this multiplicity of Indigenous voices might seem problematic, I maintain that our collective experience under colonization is such a unifying factor that there is, indeed, a singular voice. If you listen carefully to what can be hard for us to say, you'll hear fragments of the same colonial story.

For the most part, the Indigenous women (and a few men) who registered for this class had dropped out of high school years before, had worked and raised kids, dreamed of going back to school, and had finally been admitted to college. Some had spent years drinking or on drugs so coming back to school was part of their recovery. Some of them appeared hungry for the opportunity to tell their stories, as if they'd been waiting for years: for the right time and space, the right mix of people, the right circumstances.

A.C.⁴, a sixty-year old Ditidaht woman, was one of the students who seemed to need to tell her story. She'd grown up with her grandparents until, against their will, she was taken away to the Port Alberni Indian Residential School. A.C. spoke with an *Indian* accent, similar to that of Elders from my community; she reminded me of my relatives from Northern Vancouver Island. At times, she spoke harshly with an angry tone of voice; at first, I was intimidated because of this tone, her age, and her subjectivity.

She'd grown up speaking her language and this constituted a huge difference between us. *I'm supposed to be the teacher here but I feel like there's nothing for me to teach.*

A.C. told us that in residential school, she'd been called an *uncivilized heathen* and that she hadn't understood what those words meant. She told us about going to sleep hungry, about verbal and physical abuse, and about the intense loneliness at night. She told us, too, that in class she'd been called stupid because she wouldn't answer the teacher, afraid she'd give the wrong answer and be punished. And she told us about her decision not to speak her language to her own children. My mother had also made this decision, so A.C.'s story resonates for me and I can tell this is so for others as well.

Working in a (neo)colonial context means acknowledging loss and grief. A recurrent theme in the courses I taught was the guilt and grief many of our people carry today because we don't speak our own languages. I personally reflect upon my own loss and grief, identity confusion, and questions of authenticity because I am Kwakwaka'wakw—literally of the *Kwak'wala speaking people*—and yet I, like many Kwakwaka'wakw members, don't speak my language, Kwak'wala. Rarely (if ever) have I heard a white person say, "I don't speak my language", but this is a common refrain among Indigenous people.

Just make space. Listen. What we know in our collectivity is huge.

I think now that A.C. is like the women Alice Walker (1983) describes. Walker had taught a black history workshop for older and mostly minimally educated black women, and hoped they would be able to see the "faith and grace of a people under continuous pressures" (1983, p. 28). She asks:

How do you teach earnest but educationally crippled middle-aged and older women the significance of their past? How do you get them to understand the pathos and beauty of a heritage they have been taught to regard with shame? How do you make them appreciate their own endurance, creativity, incredible loveliness of spirit? It should have been as simple as handing them each a mirror, but it was not. (1983, p. 28)

A.C. is no "empty vessel waiting passively to be filled" and this classroom relationship and the opportunity for learning goes far beyond the "banking method of education" (Freire, 2005, pp. 71-86). Like the "deep reciprocity" described by Freire (2005), I learned more from A.C. than she learned from me.

And, what we know in our collectivity is astounding.

Hearing each other's stories helps to raise our consciousness, allowing us to become more aware of how our individual personal experiences are connected to larger societal problems. According to Freire (2005), students can be empowered to act to effect change on the problems affecting them. In this way, we can be transformed through the experience of being and participating in classrooms and by developing the ability to ask questions and explore how colonial and gender oppression manifest in both institutional and interpersonal relations.

I used to tell my students that my favourite classes were the ones in which I'd heard all their voices. "To hear each other (the sound of different voices), to listen to one another, is an exercise in recognition. It also ensures that no student remains invisible in the classroom" (hooks, 1994, p. 41). One way to build community in the classroom is to recognize the value of each individual voice (hooks, 1994, p. 40). I would deliberately set things up for this to happen and had assignments and activities such as a naming circle, choosing a poem to read aloud, and response papers to be read aloud. My goal: to disrupt normal speech patterns; disrupt silence; create space.

Some students had "lost [their] talk"; had "scrambled ballads" in their heads (Joe, 1998, p. 113). Make no mistake: for some students, reading aloud or speaking—even in small groups—was a very big deal. Having their (marginalized) voices heard in an academic setting was hard but important for them in finding a sense of belonging (Okada, 2006, p. 24) and reading response papers to their small groups was an opportunity to hear their own voices in a classroom. Many of these students didn't have this opportunity in other academic settings (for example, as A.C. had endured in residential school). Some struggled even to say their names.

Then there was the other stuff ... the stuff that really mattered.

"To begin a story, someone in some way must break a particular silence" (Weibe, 1998, p. 3) and there was a whole lot of silence being broken. Every week, for 26 weeks.

Stories That Mattered

One such story came out early in the school year on a hot September afternoon. Bonnie [pseudonym] told us about walking in Nanaimo one Saturday with her two children, two of her younger nieces, and a nephew. As she approached a stranger (a white guy), she noticed him looking at her and the five kids. As they passed each other, he asked, "You have all those kids so you could collect welfare?"

The classroom was quiet. Silence. We breathe together.

Until another story is shared, this one from Debbie [pseudonym], a young Nuu-Chah-Nulth woman. Debbie talked about the experience of being followed in stores because the shopkeepers expected her to shoplift.

Another story shared, from Allison [pseudonym]:

We always used to eat rice and salmon for supper. Sometimes every day for a week, we'd have rice and canned salmon. It wasn't 'til I was older and heard someone say, 'We were so poor all we ever ate was rice and salmon.' And I realized we'd been poor too but I never knew that when I was growing up. I loved rice and canned salmon. But I felt bad because eating nothing but rice and salmon meant we were poor and I never knew that at the time. Now when I give my kids rice and salmon everyday I wonder about that—if they realize we're poor.

And then Marina's [pseudonym] story about going to jail for not showing up to testify at her husband's trial. He'd beaten her up and she finally got

brave enough to call the cops. When she was in jail, the kids had to go to a temporary foster home.

Every week, stories like this were told. Never forced or coerced. Just emerging through the created space. We “*hear each other into speech*” (Barnwell, n.d.).

The stories matter because they fill the gaps in our collective story, what most of us didn’t learn in the public school system. Telling our stories seems to allow us to rise “from a condition of being victims, objects of history”, helping us to take “charge of [our] history, becoming subjects, actors in it” (Westerman, 2006, p. 230). History no longer makes or erases us. We are directly involved in making, writing, and speaking about ourselves and our lives (Westerman, 2006, p. 230). We dispel lies and tell the truth (Armstrong, 1998, p. 239).

Like the testimonials in formal settings (such as the stories told by Central American refugees in the Sanctuary movement), each student’s story was “personal, yet commented upon the larger social picture” (Westerman, p. 227). Their stories corroborated one another by offering overlapping perspectives of the same historical event. Each story was an individual’s personal story but was part of a larger colonial context.

Also, like the refugees and the residential school survivors, in the closeness of the classroom, the students are “complete, three-dimensional, feeling human beings” (Westerman, p. 228). Solidarity is created when fully human beings present their stories in an intimate setting, telling first-person accounts of racism, poverty, pain, and such, sometimes with tears. This leads to identification, sympathy, empathy, and “committed listening” (Westerman, p. 229). Almost every year there were white students in the class who (remarkably) hadn’t heard of residential schools or the only Indians they knew of were the stereotyped ones on TV or maybe the ones they’d seen (perhaps as not fully human) on the streets, the tragic examples of homelessness, perhaps. The stories created connection and tenderness and allowed them to see a shared humanity: “the similarities within ourselves” (Wolanski, 2002, p. 105).

It wasn’t all spoken narrative; some students found their voices through their art, poetry, or prose. Together, we made a class publication in which students and I submitted fiction, art, photography, personal statements, poems, or recipes, and these were bound and placed on reserve in the college library.

Other students performed spoken word or sang. Once there was a Kwakwaka’wakw love song and I remember thinking how validating and healing this was to have one of *our* songs sung here in the college. This is so different from the experiences of our parents and grandparents who’d gone to residential schools or who’d lived and learned during the banning of our ceremonies. What would they think? *They’re watching over us; what do they think?* Also, the sound of the drum would have carried

down the hall and been heard by other students and faculty members. Possibly, it would have been heard as interruption, but it was also an opportunity for integration.

Opportunities for Education are Everywhere

It was years ago and I kept no journals. But these are our memories and every year, on the last day of class, we had a celebration and a talking circle, and I distributed the class publication. We shared food, songs, and laughter; we posed for pictures, sometimes with children or aunties or mothers; sometimes we exchanged gifts, but always we had an opportunity to read from the publications. And there were more tears and more opportunity for community building (Ball, 2002, p. 2).

I told them my story and created space for theirs. That was the basic idea.

Still, there were power dynamics of which I was (and am) aware. I was the teacher, the person tasked with assigning grades at the end of the term⁵. I also left the classroom every week to return to my relatively comfortable life, whereas the students were still in the trenches, dealing with the very subject matter of the course: racism, poverty, violence, child-care issues, kids or partners who were in and out of jail or on and off drugs. The course material lent itself well to this kind of pedagogy because the women themselves ARE the subject matter; therefore, it made sense to hear, find, and encourage their collective voice. From my subsequent work at a law school, I know now that other courses (for example *Black Letter* law courses) are not easily taught with this kind of pedagogy. Also, I present these ideas as though it is all very easy when, in fact, it is not. What, for example, happens when there isn't that right mix of students? Or when, for the safety of myself and the students, I couldn't be a "mere facilitator" (Miller, 2007, p. 1). What then?

My story is of listening and bearing witness to their stories, and of my own transformation in the process. With their courage and patience, they taught and inspired me, and reminded me of the importance of continuing this work of helping others understand, and of coalition building.

What we are in our collectivity is astounding.

Now I wonder how to do that, how to honour their stories in the re-telling, using, breathing life (*ha-sa*) into the stories that were told with purpose and with the expectation that their stories would [and did!] make a difference...

And

what do I do,
'bout Annette De Roux⁶?

Ha-sa

Notes

¹ I am a member of the Kwakiutl First Nation. The Kwakiutl are part of a larger collectivity, the *Kwakwaka'wakw*, literally meaning *Kwak'wala speaking peoples*.

² I am thankful to Dr. Melody Martin and Dr. Laurie Meijer Drees, both of Vancouver Island University (formerly Malaspina University College), for sharing their ideas on the use of Indigenous protocols in the classroom.

³ For an excellent list of Indigenous feminist writers, see:

<http://profbw.wordpress.com/2008/02/28/indigenous-feminism-without-apology/>

⁴ I feel disrespectful not naming her. Our names and our nations carry credibility; it's who you are in your family and community that counts. For example, see Monture-Angus (1995, p. 13).

⁵ For an excellent discussion of power in the classroom, see West (2001) and Carillo (2007).

⁶ Annette De Roux was a dynamic and influential former student who passed away in 2002.

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