RISK TAKING IN UNIVERSITY MULTICULTURAL CLASSROOMS:

FACILITATING EXPERIENCES TO REAWAKEN AN APPRECIATION OF INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGES

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INTRODUCTION

As educators and activists on our own journeys of decolonization we have learned that taking risks helps unlearn conventional ways of being in the classroom. Taking risks can foster an appreciation and critical engagement with indigenous knowledges, and help navigate cultural appropriation. We, as a mixed-race Canadian man and an indigenous Dagara man from Ghana, have both worked in Canada and on the African continent, and are committed to the revitalization of indigenous sciences as alternative development pathways. Since 2013, we have led courses with a multicultural mix of participants from Canada, Central America, the Caribbean, Middle East, Africa and Asia. We challenge ourselves each time to create a classroom that honors an indigenous knowledges paradigm. Table 1 elaborates on this paradigm and introduces some of the people who have inspired us on this journey.

Table I: Proposed Characteristics of an Indigenous Knowledges Paradigm

| Characteristic | Brief Explanation | Major Proponents |
|-----------------------------|---|---|
| i. Decolonizing | interrogates historical relations between indigenous and non-indigenous peoples transforms relationships by appreciating indigenous ways as inherently valuable and not "other" | Battiste, 2000 Henderson, 2000 Little Bear, 2000 Smith, 2001 |
| ii. Respects Diversity | diversity respected and celebrated within community and beyond learn from biodiversity | Battiste, 2000 Marshall, 2007 Smith, 2000 |
| iii. Renaissance of Knowing | honour different epistemologies reclaim what has been lost including spiritual, intuitive and metaphysical knowing | Dei, 2000 Millar, 2004 Wilson, 2008 |
| iv. Explicit Value Base | Axiology is central to paradigm Values such as communality, reciprocity, and interdependence with nature are important | Caastellano, 2004 Loppie, 2005 Millar, 2006 |
| v. Pragmatic | initiatives must be useful for indigenous people;supportive of improvements in culture and socio-economic conditions | Mi'kmaq College Institute, 2006 Smith, 2001 |
| vi. Relational | relationships central to the process; before, during and after must be mutually respectful, honour diversity; including with nature solidarity and maintenance of relationships important | Battiste, 2000 Bishop, 2005 Wilson, 2008 |
| | | |

We have co-taught eight intensive two-week courses with approximately 15 participants each on the topic of building community resilience. We have been honored to have many indigenous guest speakers in our classroom. They provided insights into indigenous history, struggles, knowledges and sciences. We have organized field visits in Mi'gma'gi and been invited to ceremony in Paqtnkek, Mill Brook, Abegweit and also in Forikrom, Ghana. These were significant experiences for participants. It helped them understand the shared history of a world dominated by colonial and global corporate power, and catalyzed an appreciation for the efforts people are making to rebuild community resilience based on their identity, culture and wisdom.

However, we have always felt our own responsibility to transform the classroom itself. The value of this perspective was confirmed for us by Elder Kerry Prosper, of Paqtnkek First Nation. At an event at STFX University in 2016 Elder Prosper asked, "how many of you are indigenous?" A small group of Mi'kmaw and other aboriginal students raised their hands – maybe 20 people in the crowd of 400. "So where are the rest of you from, Kerry asked, "Mars?". He went on to explain that we are all indigenous to this planet, and that we all have responsibility to the natural environment and all living beings, and to treat each other with love and respect. This teaching was a profound reminder of our interdependence, and how 'decolonizing the academy' means a responsibility to bring an appreciation for the sacredness of land and a respect for diverse knowledges and lifeways into our education system. To simply create space for the "other" within the confines of a pedagogy dominated by conventional modes of thinking is insufficient.

Therefore we have taken risks to build experiential activities into our course to reveal the indigenous knowledges paradigm. Activities start with peoples' experience, focus on reflection and meaning making and move towards actions. This approach resonates with the First Nations learning epistemology captured by Kaminski and Currie (2017) in Diagram 1.

This poster describes seven of these experiential activities and associated risks. These activities constitute about 25% of a course of 72 contact hours. They are integrated with indigenous guests, field visits, lectures, critical readings, case study analysis, films, class discussions, written assignments and participant presentation,





EXPERIENCING

MAKING MEANING

ACTING

REFLECTING

EXPERIENTIAL ACTIVITIES

MORNING MYSTICA

Each morning we sat in circle for "mystica". This was a time for building the community of learners, to bring in co-facilitators we offered a simple activity from our own spiritual practice on the two opening days - a breathing activity with meditation, and a call on the wisdom of African ancestors. We then offered this activity of their choice. Participants led a Maliseet smudge ceremony, a Mayan candle lighting to the four directions, an offering of plants from the natural environment, and inspirational singing. We encouraged an interfaith perspective and welcomed activities and prayers from different faith traditions in this multicultural classroom where respect for different

We help participants connect to the natural world and

Each participant writes a value on a stone and these are

kept in the center of the room as "witnesses" to the course.

People discuss how in different traditions stones are seen

EXPERIENCES FOR "Learning from nature ... and from the facilitators' experiences made the course very attractive for me. I also realized that I can learn from the nature CONNECTING TO NATURE. God created without paying any cost." (2015)

The tree exercise or tree meditation was wonderful. However, it would be better if we have at least 30 minutes to observe the tree in the very beginning and then again on the last day."

"Everyday starting with mystica was a perfect way to begin." (2016) "I liked mystica. I liked the seed

mandala." (2017) "Keep up mystica, it bring closeness of the group." (2016) "Be careful about mystica. Some

people may create a false connection between things:

for example natural disasters with morality and people's

"I loved the nature walk we had as part of class activity. It made me appreciate nature and see things from a different light." (2017)



SHARING COLONIAL HISTORIES AND BURNING BOWL CEREMONY

THE I CHING WORKBOOK AS A WAY TO TAP

We help participants connect to the natural world and other living beings using the animal medicine cards. They demonstrate there is wisdom to be gained by observing the particular animal carries (Sams & Carson, 1997). This ANCIENT WISDOM The I Ching, or ancient Chinese Book of Change, is a philosophical almanac, based on centuries of observation. often stimulates participants from the African continent speaking of their own animal totems. Stones are also used. Consisting of 64 wise essays that you access by throwing 3 coins it is described "like unwrapping, unfolding and discovering yourself; and in the process, discovering this intricate and perplexing world to be something that you have intimately understood all along" (Wing, 1979: 9). as "grandfathers" and are treated with special respect, or are used to construct sacred sites in their own countries Experiencing the ceremony of "asking a question" to the l are used to construct sacred sites in their own countries such as Great Zimbabwe and the pyramids of Egypt. These discussions open up space for acknowledging energetic grace this planet. We have also experimented with silent nature walks, planting and purturing a horn good, and Ching in a multicultural classroom has peaked participants curiosity, unsettled their learned ideas of decision making, and challenged their notions of what constitutes knowledge and wisdom. It has opened discussions about metaphysical energies and multiple intelligences. Soothsayers, psychics, and shamans are common in many cultures and are respected for the insights they provide to one's personal life. This experience helps participants revisit how they use their own traditions of knowledge in their community work. Marginalization and discrimination against these types of knowledge has a colonial heritage. Newfound respect and acknowledgement of this wisdom is important for respecting diversity.

DOUBLE TRANSLATION

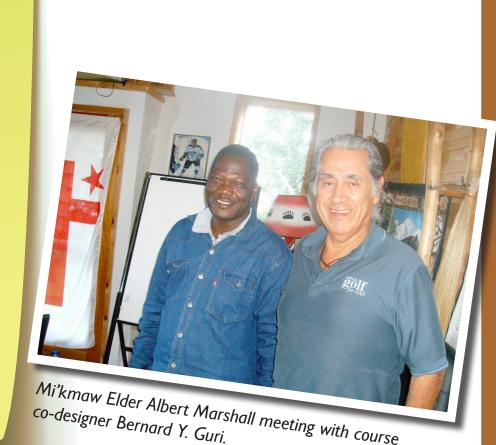
end of the course I did have some shifts in attitude. But the anger fro

o talk about something you face daily, and people talk like its in the

LANGUAGE EXPLORATION Our classes were conducted in English. Collectively participants often spoke many languages. We discussed the codification of lifeways and values within these languages and how these can be lost in translation, even in the subtle connotations of certain words. To expose this we asked participants to do a double translation activity. First, to think of two or three of the core concepts discussed in class in English that resonated with them, to translate those concepts into their own language, and then to translate the concepts back into English. It was not to be a literal ranslation, but to try and get at the subtle connotation of concepts and what the deeper meaning of them really is. This activity was quite revealing and also inspired participants to share some proverbs from their own cultures related to the concepts being discussed.

VALUES CARDS FOR PERSONAL DISCOVERY

We open up explicit discussion about values using a deck of values cards. Each card has a short explanation of a value eg. "Respectful: valuing the unique part of each person, I acknowledge even the smallest contribution", "Cooperative: I am open-handed in using my time and talent to create positive outcomes". These cards proved useful to inspire personal discovery, and open up conversations that are often left out of the university classroom. Each individual receives a different values card at random. This opens up the "magic" connection to the value – "why did I get this value", "this really resonates with me", or "this is something I aspire to". We also use a deck of ancestor wisdom cards containing quotes and proverbs in different languages from the African continent (Ancestor Wisdom, 2012), and a deck of animal medicine cards (Sams & Carson, 1997) with messages from the animal world.





Collectively constructing mandalas is a tradition for many peoples including the Navaho of the southern United States and Buddhist practitioners of Tibet (Gold, 1994). These colorful artworks of sand or seeds demand a calm and reflective attitude to create, a deep commitment to respect and cooperation to complete collectively, and an ability to appreciate impermanence when they are destroyed. In our classroom we set up a table with an outline of a mandala on it and lots of different colors of seeds or beans. At the end of most days we stand around the table and each participant shares their learning from the day while adding a handful of seeds to the mandala. This ceremony opens up space for powerful expressions, encourages social learning and an appreciation for diversity within the class. Over the two weeks of the course a beautiful abstract art piece is produced. We use the metaphor of the seeds as the potential for learning that is planted in people during the course.

"BLIK was an amazing experience, both professionally and spiritually." (2013) "The facilitators afforded me the space where I felt safe to ask questions without feeling that I would be judged of being right or wrong." (2016)



African Indigenous people have similar issues and customs with Mayan culture, such as the worldview nature, and weaving in spirituality." (2015)

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TENSIONS AND CRITIQUE

Taking risks to structure experiences and open space for learning from indigenous knowledges has been fruitful. Our own reflections and participants' evaluation comments have been positive, however, there have been challenges along the way.

In one case a mystica facilitated by a participant took on a strong evangelical tone where others felt forced to participate in religious activities outside their comfort zone. In other cases mysticas were considered too superficial, too deep, or took too much time. In spite of this mystica helped set the atmosphere and nurtured a renaissance of knowing.

Having people share their own colonial and globalization histories was instrumental. In classes of great diversity there was always the risk of participants comparing oppressions. There was the balancing act of critical analysis on historical materialism and then moving forward with an appreciative lens of how to influence change. Having limited time also

meant that some participants wanted more discussion throughout the course concerning colonialism and globalization. The burning bowl ceremony was considered superficial by some and may have resulted in people bonding over painful memories when done hurriedly, rather than renewing energy for solidarity and

The language activities were useful, but in many cases participants had not learned the indigenous languages of their people. The activity therefore challenged their selfesteem and forced them to recall the lack of opportunities they had to learn that language. In other instances this lack inspired a flurry of text messages and phone calls to parents and elders at home to get them to help with the assignment. The risk seemed to be useful in many ways for contributing to a renaissance of knowing and decolonizing language.

Using values cards for personal discovery was an element of the course that was loved by

many participants, and they saw the connection to the general topic of building community resilience. It was too far a stretch for others who could not see how personal discovery could lead to community and societal level change. This polarity of personal change versus societal change is contested, but in our course the values discussions helped in cultivating a renaissance of knowing, relationality and exploring values explicitly that we believe is a risk worth taking.

During the course we spent lots of time in classroom, much of it discussing our relationship with nature, but only sometimes connected with nature itself. Real risk taking would be to move the course out into nature which we are trying in an upcoming rendition of the course to be offered in Kenya. The <u>I</u> *Ching* was too much for some people. Even the seed mandala was critiqued because it disrespected the seeds, and for one Haitian participant was too similar to Vodou ceremonies that he considered evil, so he would only observe.

CONCLUSION

We offered these courses in diverse multicultural classrooms. However, in most cases there were very few participants of a settler background. It is important to ask ourselves: how we would adjust these experiential activities for a settler, dominant culture classroom? Are there other activities that can work in a subtle way to get people engaged from a more holistic place?

Taking risk with experiential activities has both tensions and rewards. Using activities borrowed from other places can be considered cultural appropriation if not acknowledged and offered in a spirit of appreciation. Efforts need to be made to ensure authentic voices, too often silenced, are heard. If all educators do not take risks with experiential activities ourselves, however, it will be ever more difficult to break out of the existing paradigm. Our journey as educators seeking ways to reawaken an appreciation of indigenous knowledges and ways of being continues. For us it is both a responsibility and a commitment to the future, and to our ancestors of the past.

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