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**Multiple Ways of Knowing: Encouraging Inter-Cultural Dialogue and Education Through Poetry and Art**

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**ABSTRACT**

In today's Canadian classrooms our students bring with them a rich array of cultural backgrounds and ways of viewing the world. Recently in British Columbia, the Ministry of Education introduced a New Curriculum initiative that requires teachers to find ways to integrate the history and worldview of Canada's First Nations peoples into existing curriculum. Along with this directive, teachers are also asked to offer opportunities for reflection and expression of each student's unique identity and cultural background. As an instructor of pre-service teachers in the fields of Art education and Literacy, a large part of my work is to help prepare them to meet this new demand. Consequently, inspired by the work of Vicki Kelly, an expert in the field of Aboriginal Education, I designed the Multiple Identities project. The purpose of this art and writing project is to model meaningful educational experiences while providing students with knowledge and understanding of First Peoples principles of learning. An additional purpose of the project is to provide the means for students to express and communicate their own unique ethnicity and lived experience while encouraging respectful inter-cultural dialogue and understanding among classmates. Based on evidence collected through qualitative inquiry based research, this paper will describe the "Multiple Identities" project and discuss its impact on students' concepts of language, culture and education and possible implications for the classroom.

*Keywords:* Identity, education, art and culture

**Introduction**

Canada, like many countries in the world, has a complex history and relationship with our First Peoples. Recently in British Columbia, the Ministry of Education introduced a New Curriculum initiative that requires teachers to find ways to integrate the history and worldview of Canada's First Nations peoples into existing curriculum. The New Curriculum was introduced in part, as a way of responding to recommendations put forward by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Report (TRC): Calls to Action (2015). In the report, it was determined that a critical aspect of bringing about meaningful reconciliation is "re-education" through transformation of existing curriculum. As stated in the TRC report "It is largely because education was the primary tool of oppression of Aboriginal people, and the miseducation of all Canadians, that we have concluded that Education holds the key for reconciliation".

Authentic and respectful inclusion of Aboriginal content, culture, and knowledge in contemporary curricula is necessary in term of true reconciliation, as sacred beliefs and traditions of First People were forced underground for years. This was accomplished largely through residential schooling, illegalization of Aboriginal languages and traditions such as powwows. The new mandate states, "Aboriginal peoples are part of the historical and contemporary foundation of British Columbia and Canada, and an introduction to

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Aboriginal perspectives provides BC students with an opportunity to develop empathy, respect, and good citizenship” (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015).

Along with the initiative to integrate Aboriginal perspectives, the New Curriculum also encourages teachers to offer a range of opportunities for reflection and expression of each student’s unique identity and ethnicity. This direction has emerged as a way to respond inclusively to the many cultures and languages at play in our schools. As Canada welcomes, new immigrants from around the world, our classrooms are filled with students who bring with them a rich array of cultural backgrounds and ways of viewing the world. Thus, multiple languages and cultures are well represented in the average classroom.

Moreover, it is not unusual for over 100 languages to be spoken within an individual Elementary school. Recent data shows that English Language Learner (ELL) students are in the majority at more than 60 schools across Metro Vancouver, (British Columbia Ministry of Education, 2015). At some schools, Ell students make up over 70% of the classroom composition (Skelton, 2014). Furthermore, the majority of students who are learning English are placed in regular classrooms with minimal additional support. For the most part, fluency in English is acquired through immersion in the classroom content, curriculum and culture. Consequently, there is a need for teachers to find ways to not only accommodate students acquiring English language skills, but to also look for ways to build a respectful and positive classroom community among learners with diverse needs and backgrounds. This is especially true as “an important goal in integrating Aboriginal perspectives into curricula is to ensure that all learners have opportunities to understand and respect their own cultural heritage as well as that of others” (British Columbia, Ministry of Education, 2015).

### **Purpose and Objectives**

Part of the rationale for the New Curriculum, is the awareness there is a need to decolonize the educational experience for our students. Part of decolonizing our education system is to make space for perspectives and ways of knowing that are not grounded solely in the Eurocentric narrative. Finding ways to encourage multiple perspectives through curriculum that is engaging and meaningful offers students an alternative to globalization and the “uni-narrative” of western culture. In turn, it can lead to examining issues of appropriation and challenging persistent and pervasive stereotypes.

It matters that we address these issues more deeply, because all too often, cultural difference is addressed only through holiday celebrations, costumes and decorations. Too often this results in surface understandings that can inadvertently perpetuate stereotypes and assumptions. Susan Dion (2007) emphasizes this point:

With the advent of multicultural and antiracism education teachers have been inundated with demands to address “difference” in their teaching yet many teachers do not know what to teach or how to teach to difference. They do know that ways of teaching that reproduce stereotypical representations are inadequate, thus there is a fear and a silence involved in addressing this content” (p. 331).

As Dion points out, the trepidation on the part of educators that they might get it wrong or unintentionally perpetuate stereotypes too often results in leaving issues of difference out of the curriculum entirely.

What is needed are effective ways to address potentially contentious issues within core curricula. Curriculum matters; as Elliot Eisner points out, “parents send their children to school to have their minds shaped” (2002, p. 4). The content of what we teach, and how we invite students to engage with that content are key. As educators, what we choose to leave in, and what we choose to omit, impacts not only our students’ individual sense of self, but also how they come to know and perceive “others”.

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It is not easy to shift from perceiving the “issue of difference” as something that can be somewhat contentious, to viewing it as a complex but ultimately enriching area to navigate. Therefore, it is vital that students and educators alike are given the space and time to engage in educational experiences that allow for meaningful reflection and dialogue. It was with these thoughts in mind that I designed the Multiple Identities Project.

### **Multiple Identities Project**

The purpose of the Multiple Identity project is to model meaningful educational experiences while providing students with knowledge and understanding of First Peoples principles of learning. An additional purpose of the project is to provide the means for students to express and communicate their own unique ethnicity and lived experience while encouraging respectful inter-cultural dialogue and understanding among classmates. Even though I work with students in a university context, these individuals mirror a very similar range of cultural backgrounds found in a typical lower mainland classroom. The research for this study was conducted with three different groups of students, with approximately 30 students in each group: The first group were students enrolled in Education and General Studies courses working toward their Bachelor of Education degree. The second group of students already have degrees in various undergrad programs and are completing the Professional Development Program (PDP) and are about to start teaching in the school system. The third group are student teachers who are enrolled in the Professional Linking Program and currently working in the schools and communities as Special Education Assistants and support workers. In total, there were 87 students.

Inquiry based research methodology was used to collect qualitative data. Evidence collected throughout the different stages of the project includes student reflections and responses, verbal feedback, and artwork and poetry.

### **Project Description**

To provide some historical context and knowledge of Aboriginal history and perspectives, students are asked to read and write responses to various readings that address these areas. However, sharing of the responses and discussion of the readings are purposefully delayed until after students have experienced the art, poetry and reflexive aspects of the project. The intention is for students to be introduced to Aboriginal ways of knowing through direct experience first, before intellectual/objective distance is brought into play.

The first part of the activity focuses on connecting to the physical, cultural and spiritual environments we feel the most at home in. Aboriginal scholars and elders emphasize “being and place are conceptually linked.” (Ortiz, as cited in Johnson, 2007, p, 135); relationship to place is critical to forming our identity and how we come to perceive the world around us. This notion forms the core of Pedagogy of place - our identity is deeply rooted in our spiritual, environmental and cultural ecologies.

We begin by exploring the physical and metaphorical places we feel most authentically ourselves. Vicki Kelly describes it as our spiritual ecology - this is the space that nurtures our being and our learning. In this space and place we can think and understand and reason the best. If we never spend time in our spiritual place, we cannot learn; our hearts die. Even thinking about that space and place can refresh us and help us to remember who we are and where we are from (in conversation, March 3, 2011). There are numerous aspects to this space including our relationship to place, plants, people, animals, and traditions. It is important to note that our spiritual ecology goes beyond the physical realm to include family, community, culture, values and spaces.

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Through reflective writing and drawing exercises, students are invited to respond to the question “where do you grow best?” The purpose of reflecting on this line of inquiry is to discover or rediscover your roots. From First Nations’ thinking all the trees in the forest stand straight and tall and individually, but underneath all the roots intertwine and hold hands. The people know that with certain mosses you find certain orchids; with certain trees, you find certain shrubs and berries. Certain plants grow best with other certain plants (Archibald, J., Aquash, M., Kelly, V., & Cranmer, L., 2009).

An additional purpose of articulating the conditions we need to thrive is to realize that we all see things in different ways, have different life experiences, see and understand different things, in short, we all have our own story. There are different ways of ‘knowing’. We forget past ways and think there is only one way of knowing, learning, growing, being, and doing (Vicki Kelly, personal communication, March 3, 2011). Multiple subjectivities go beyond human perception; every intelligence has their own way of seeing. As David Abram tells us, “every form one perceives – from the swallow swooping overhead to the fly on a blade of grass and indeed the blade of grass itself –is an experiencing form, and entity with its own predictions and sensations, albeit sensations that are very different from our own” (1996, p. 10).

After sketching and writing, students are given time to share their thoughts and memories in small groups or pairs. This gives participants a chance to both synthesize their discoveries, and connect with someone in the class they do not know. In keeping with oral traditions used in Indigenous ways of knowing, having a chance to verbally share their stories is key.

### Turning Reflections into Poetry

The Indigenous Peoples use the phrase “I am from...” to express the places and spaces, elements and qualities, people, animals and values of their souls, of their understanding (Vicki Kelly, personal communication, March 3, 2011). Referring to earlier reflections, drawings and conversations, participants are invited to create poems beginning with the words “I am from” adding the place or places they feel most alive and authentically themselves. Students are encouraged to add artwork to their poems and to include the things their senses see and hear, smell and touch. Poems are shared first in pairs and then whoever is comfortable, is given the opportunity to share their poem with the whole group.

The following are some examples of the poems created:

I am from dappled light

I am from the smell of salt, warm grass and Douglas fir sap

I am from the sound of a breeze through leaves, the crackling of arbutus leaves beneath my bare feet

I am from tide pools, searching for micro worlds to get lost in

I am from barnacle cuts and splinters

I am from freedom

I am from nature

I am from the soft underbelly of the forest floor

I am from the smell of decaying sticks and moss

I am from the sound of crow and eagle cries

I am from the island of the warm summer breeze

I am from a place far from here, but also so close that it seems far from my current state. I search for that place daily, where I am one with my creator, and at home where I've always been. I get only glimpses of its beauty, because anything more

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would be too overwhelming for my heart and too incomprehensible for my mind  
And with every glimpse, it's like living water, it's something filling me like no  
thing in this earthly realm can come close to. It gives me hope to visit this place in  
my mind and in my heart, knowing I will one day be there constantly and  
permanently in body, mind, and spirit. It cleanses me and reminds me of who and  
what I really am... spotless eternal pure

I am from my family  
Sometimes loud, boisterous, and crazy,  
talking over one another at the dinner table  
Sometimes quiet, meticulous, and sensitive  
Always loving, caring, and protective

I am from nature  
Pulling myself through the water,  
my body weightless, sun warming my face  
Call of the loon echoing off the mountains

I am from my stories  
Real and fictional  
Moving through Hogwarts, wand in hand  
Sitting in Nana's kitchen, flour on nose  
the smell of baking bread  
Anticipating Grandpa's magic, always wondrous

### **Identity Boxes: Internal and External Representations of SELF**

In order to address the issues of stereotypes and cultural appropriation, students design and construct "Identity boxes". The purpose of the Identity box is to explore the tension between societal views of our cultural identity and gendered roles and the subjective truth our authentic selves and lives. In the simplest terms, the outside of the box represents how society and others see us, and the inside of the box represents our internal environmental, spiritual, cultural, ecological sense of self. For the outside of the box students are asked to brainstorm the roles they play in their life and societal stereotypes that might apply. For the inside of the box students were encouraged to use the words and images from the text "I am from..." poems and exploration.

The boxes are generally the size of a shoebox with a lid. Both the inside and the outside of the box are collaged with a wide range of materials, textures, and images. On the inside of the box, students are invited to add any text, artwork artefacts, and/or photos that hold personal meaning for them. As well, students are welcome to use recycled materials, and collect materials from outside (leaves, branches, etc.). Besides text, the outside of the box often displays images from magazines and other public domains. Students are given time both inside and outside of class to complete their projects. There are simple guidelines for the design and creation of the boxes, but there is also a great deal of freedom within the suggested structure. The resulting creations are as varied as the students themselves.

A final stage of the project is for students to participate in a "gallery walk". The intention of the "walk" is to give students the opportunity to not only display their creations, but to converse with each other in depth about the choices they made and the stories behind the representations. In this way, "intercultural dialogue" emerges naturally. Because of the sensitive nature of the project, it is important for students to understand

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they have a choice of what they choose to reveal and what they wish to conceal. It is not unusual for some students to display their boxes with the lids on and to selectively share what is on the inside. This is an important choice to model, for in our classrooms students need to feel they are the ones in charge of deciding what aspects of themselves they wish to share.

### Student Feedback

After experiencing the various aspects of the project, students are asked to write reflections (taking the readings into account) describing the impact of the Multiple Identities project on their concepts of language, culture and education. They are also encouraged to consider possible implications for the classroom and to describe strengths and weaknesses of the approaches taken.

One of the most central readings is the First People's Principles of Learning as stated on the BC Ministry of Education website, 2015:

Learning ultimately supports the well-being of the self, the family, the community, the land, the spirits, and the ancestors.

Learning is holistic, reflexive, reflective, experiential, and relational (focused on connectedness, on reciprocal relationships, and a sense of place).

- Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions.
- Learning involves generational roles and responsibilities.
- Learning recognizes the role of indigenous knowledge.
- Learning is embedded in memory, history, and story.
- Learning involves patience and time.
- Learning requires exploration of one's identity.
- Learning involves recognizing that some knowledge is sacred and only shared with permission and/or in certain situations.

The following excerpts are a sampling of student responses. Some students wrote about possible cross-curricular connections and opportunities to address issues of colonization:

“Along with exploring cross curricular connections, the issue of colonization was also addressed: The inside outside identity box could be used in Social Studies when discussing the two very different perspectives involving the colonization of Canada – the Aboriginal perspective and the European perspective. The outside of the box would represent the narrow ways in which Europeans viewed the First Nations people and their way of life. The inside of the box would represent the dynamic ways in which First Nations people viewed themselves, their land and the world. This could lead to connecting students with the First Peoples Principles of Learning (FPPL): Learning involves recognizing the consequences of one's actions. And asking students ‘what were the consequences to Aboriginal people? And are we continuing to see the consequences of colonization today?’”

Students also wrote about the role they played in the project:

“Art education framed by a critical pedagogy of place creates opportunities for students to engage in thinking and art making that considers vital questions about nature, place, culture, and ecology. From Graham (2007, p.3): There is a well-established tradition in art education that emphasizes the value of art making as a means to increase students' awareness and appreciation of the various communities to which they belong.”

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“I agree with Graham that drawing can be viewed as research and discover practice that connects art making to scientific inquiry and allows students to use the processes of art to understand and appreciate the world. This made me realize that art makes students aware of their existence and how their environment affects their lives. Students are able to construct meaningful connections among cultural, political, and social issues. Additionally, art education can increase their appreciation of the various communities to which they belong. I realize now that critical, place-based pedagogies can help create meaningful connections to natural and human communities.”

Many of the students commented on how the project made them more aware of their relationship to each other and to the earth:

“Any subject area can be taken outside and be used as a vehicle to help students understand the relationships of their personal world, the greater world and the universe we depend on.”

“Ways to adapt this activity across a variety of disciplines and age groups would be to continue to bring students outside, into their place and use appropriate activities and questions to point the towards the visible and hidden relationships they see.”

“It would be equally useful for older and younger students. For primary students, it could be as simple as breaking identity down to their earliest memories and favourite sense memories.”

“Place based education and art education like our activity, all place the learning we experienced in a specific and deeply meaningful context. That being ourselves, how we relate to our notions of self and how we are part of our surroundings. It asks that we place our relationships at the forefront of our minds, rather than compartmentalizing them into subcategories of our mind that we would normally label: knowledge, emotions, feelings, observations, ideas, etc. and helps us to realize that all of these things are related and that our inner and outer selves are products of our place, and the ongoing cycle of building our knowledge based on our ‘boxes’.”

A number of participants commented on the connections between culture, identity and language:

“Place based education and art education (like multiple identities project) all place the learning we experienced in a specific and deeply meaningful context. I appreciated that the project, while demonstrating FPPL also makes connections to each individual’s personal, familial or cultural roots. By linking First Peoples way of knowing to the students own identity helps to elucidate the idea that indigenous knowledge can be useful for students from a multitude of backgrounds.”

“Brainstorming where one feels the most at home and writing the ‘I am from...’ poem emphasizes that learning is reflexive.”

Many of the students in our class reflected on their connections to the land, but also how experiences or connections to family and friends can also provide or represent the idea of “home”.

The progressive experience of creating the identity box, moving from more general ideas of home to specific notions of inner self, also helped me to appreciate that “learning

requires exploration of one's identity" (First People's principles). I felt that in order to successfully write a meaningful "I am from..." poem, I had to dig deeper to accurately reflect what I believe to be my personal roots."

"Place based art education helps us to realize we are a product of our place, our place in time and our place on the planet. How the rest of our community and indeed the world perceives this relationship also deeply affects our place and our relationship with both the outer world of our physical experiences and the inner world of our internal meaning making. Without a deep understanding of the importance of relationships within our place and within ourselves, progress for us as a species, and our planet may not come soon enough."

An unexpected outcome of the project was that some students wrote at length about the connection between aboriginal perspectives/ First Peoples Principles/ new curriculum and students with special needs. The following illustrates this point of view: "I appreciated that the project, while demonstrating FPPL also makes connections to each individual's personal, familial or cultural roots. By linking First Peoples way of knowing to the students own identity helps to elucidate the idea that indigenous knowledge can be useful for students from a multitude of backgrounds."

### **Conclusion**

One of the main challenges faced by pre-service and practicing teachers is an internal hesitation to teach Indigenous perspectives and content when they themselves do not have Aboriginal heritage. Many teachers express that they do not feel comfortable "speaking for" a culture that is not their own. Often educators are afraid they will inadvertently misrepresent important First Peoples perspectives, or appear to be usurping sacred material. This uncertainty, largely unexpressed and unaddressed, too often results in Aboriginal history and perspectives being partially presented, or omitted altogether. However, one of the most positive outcomes of the New Curriculum is the directive that now teachers must find ways to embed Aboriginal perspectives and history of colonization into the curriculum. It is no longer a personal choice.

In many respects the new mandate is a relief. In my own experience, both in my role as District Resource teacher for Academic Literacy for Aboriginal students in an urban school district, and as a university instructor for pre-service and practicing teachers there is a persistent fear that it is not "my place" to teach these areas. The fear that I will be viewed as appropriating content, or misrepresenting indigenous perspectives and history is a very real concern. The new curriculum addresses these reservations in numerous ways; for example, it is recommended that the issue of appropriation be discussed openly with students.

Another way to overcome this challenge is to familiarize ourselves with the culture; deep listening, inviting elders, and First Nations artists into the classroom and using their visits to begin or build a unit of study. Recognizing common values among cultures is also critical; for example, having discussions and presentations on how a sense of the sacred is recognized in the aboriginal and linking that to discussions and presentations on how religious and spiritual beliefs are central to most cultures. Meaningful discussion can be initiated by asking questions such as "what do you value? What does your family and ancestors hold as meaningful and important? And how do these beliefs impact traditions and behaviors? What are the similarities and differences?"

Rather than ignoring the abundant diversity in our classrooms, a project such as the Multiple Identities project encourages potentially sensitive, but significant discourse. Inter-cultural dialogue is worthwhile because it helps us to experience multiple ways of



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knowing and to recognize our inherent interconnection and interdependency. Because it offers students the choice of what they choose to reveal and what they wish to conceal, a project such as this can serve as a constructive first step in providing students the means to be authors of their own identities. It also encourages the awareness that each one of us is at the center of our own story, and author of our own unique identity. One of the most successful aspects of the project is that it is at heart inclusive. The rich variation of identity boxes, poetry, and artwork makes it clear that there is no “wrong way” of being alive - there are “many right ways”.

One of the clear findings to emerge from the Multiple Identities project is the importance of being able to tell one’s own story and seeing that story as being a valuable strand in the overall fabric of the classroom and community. This matters not only in terms of the atmosphere in our classrooms, but also the impact on our larger communities and culture. Reflecting on our own roots and connections to our collective and individual histories, fosters a sense of ownership and caring for the world we are re-imagining together (Maxine Greene, 2005). Forming these connections allows us to open our web of relationships to include more than one way of knowing and to understand there are multiple ways of being human.

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