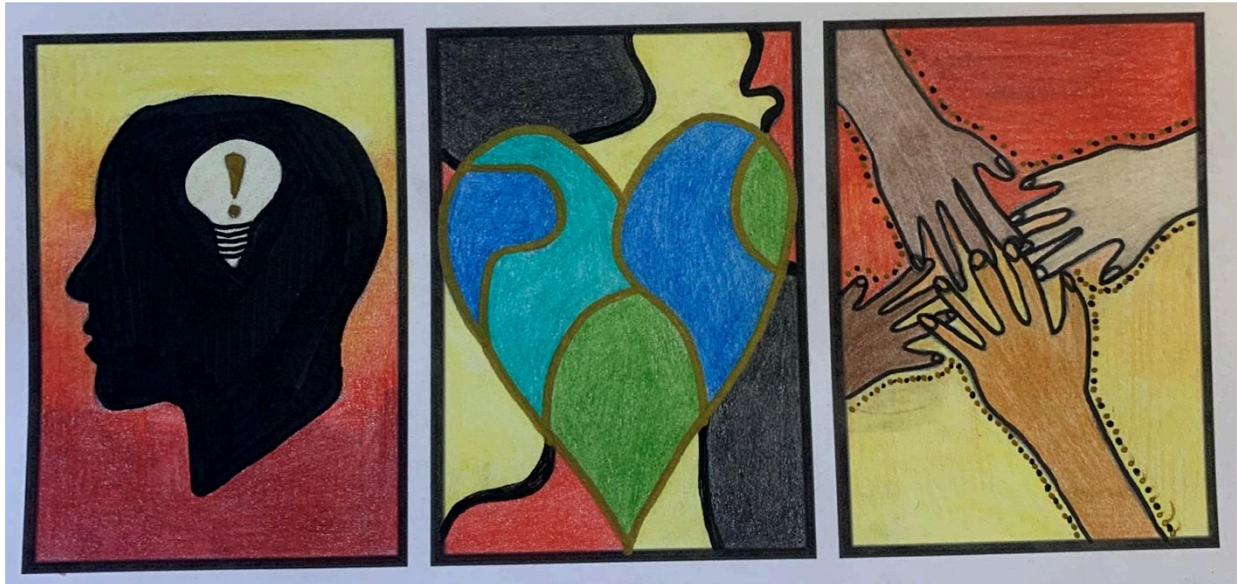


Brock University welcomes Project of Heart: Transforming learning spaces (*featuring Emily Hoch*)
by Stanley R. Henry



(Photo credit: Emily Hoch, 4th year student in Brock University's Concurrent Education program)

Context for the Course

Despite the challenges of remote learning due to the Covid-19 global pandemic, engaging in truth telling and difficult learning on Canada's colonial legacy persists. In the winter semester of 2021, Project of Heart was introduced to Brock University's concurrent education students through course, *EDUC 3P91: Pedagogies of Indigenous Arts*. This course, developed by Dr. Spy Dénommé-Welch, now Associate Professor and Research Chair (Tier 2) in Indigenous Arts, Knowledge Systems, and Education at Western University, introduces students to Indigenous arts, the teaching of Indigenous arts as pedagogy, and what the applications are of Indigenous Arts in a K-12 educational classroom context. The major learning outcomes for the course, *EDUC 3P91: Pedagogy of Indigenous Arts* allows students to conclude the course with a deeper appreciation for, and a wider understanding of, Indigenous arts and the pedagogies of Indigenous Arts.

Procedure, Components, and Assignment

A core assignment in *EDUC 3P91: Pedagogy of Indigenous Arts* was submitting a Statement of Learning for which Project of Heart was central. The assignment (with financial support from the Teaching & Learning Innovation Grant through Brock University's Centre for Pedagogical Innovation) was compartmentalized into eight stages. The assignment spanned three weeks and included 1) studying the historical record of Indian Residential Schools by reading course content that featured Richard Wagamese's *Indian Horse* and a first-hand account of survivor from the Mohawk Institute; 2) watching *We Were Children* and researching the Woodland

Cultural Centre's 'Save the Evidence Campaign' by watching a pre-recorded presentation by Carley Gallant-Jenkins; 3) participating in a virtual seminar to unpack the course content; 4) participating in a virtual tour of the former Mohawk Institute (featuring Laurie Gallant) and attending a question and answer period on the Mohawk Institute; 5) exploring Project of Heart's website and watching a pre-recorded video on Project of Heart by Nancy Hamer-Strahl; 6) capturing one's learning about the Mohawk Institute on wooden tiles; 7) pasting images in Microsoft Word and reflecting on the images through writing and submitting a "Statement of Learning" assignment; and 8) gifting two of three tiles to people outside the course as a first act of reconciliation.

From the beginning of the project, students are guided by the question: "Through doing Project of Heart, how has this activity transformed my understanding of how I can act as an agent of reconciliation?" This process is an example of transformative education, and this process mobilizes on Truth and Reconciliation in Canada. By gifting the tiles to friends, family, or people beyond the course, students are accepting the responsibility to amplify the truth on one of Canada's colonial legacies, the Indian Residential Schools System. In essence, this educational experience seeks to strengthen the connection between home and school. The aspirations are to 'bring home' difficult conversations by which Indigenous peoples live daily. Evidence of student work by Emily Hoch (student in the concurrent education program at Brock University), is described below.

Reflection from Emily Hoch

Project of Heart encouraged me to step beyond the limited comfortability of listening to factual knowledge about historical and current Indigenous topics and progress into a learning space of discomfort and growth. The process of being comfortable with being uncomfortable (J. O'Reilly, personal communication, May 4, 2018) is challenging. Although, when we accept the challenge, we recognize the interconnectedness and dependence between the head, heart, and hands. Project of Heart has shown me that heart work goes the distance through extending the factual knowledge far beyond the textbooks and classroom. It is the work that recognizes the history and trauma, but equally recognizes the resiliency of Indigenous people, amplifies Indigenous voices, and provides deep recognition and support for the current investment for a better future that is based on truth (Education Woodland Cultural Centre [EWCC], 2021). When I began learning, conversing, looking, reflecting, and listening to and about Indigenous lives outside of the school context, I was able to connect the historical and contemporary facts with raw trauma and growth and healing. These are the moments that connect factual information with real people and real lives. Overall, I have learned through Project of Heart, I can be an agent for reconciliation by standing with Indigenous people. Through listening, learning, growing, and opening my mind and sharing my experience and knowledge with my fellow peers, I continually move towards a greater understanding of the truth, and towards reconciling relationships based on this truth and recognition. These are learnings that extend far beyond the four walls of the classroom.

Lesson Learned: Targeting the Dinner Table Talks as Pedagogy

In developing the teaching methodology for my course, the conversational method used for weekly “talks” on course content made sense. To develop the teaching methodology and the philosophies driving this pedagogy, I approached this course assignment grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and informed by educational research on the foundations of Indigenous education as described by a reputable scholar in Indigenous education, Dr. Gregory Cajate. Some pertinent foundations of Indigenous Education (articulated in *Look to the Mountain: An Ecology of Indigenous Education*) is learning is a process that adheres to a principle of mutual reciprocity between Creation and human beings; knowledge sources dwell within individuals and the Natural World; the ebbs and flows of learning is interrelation and flows through people, Creation, and the cosmos; and stories and metaphors are essential vehicles of learning. Furthermore, the outcomes of the Indigenous education process results in strong and complete communities and communities that cohabitate with the Natural World.

I define “Targeting the dinner table talk as pedagogy” as imaginary spaces, where critical thinking and truthful dialogue are brought to our dinner table conversations to tackle issues of social justice, racism, and social inequities. In many ways, the “spaces” for the processes of becoming fully human and a strong contributing citizen to one’s community through “learning”, are fluid and diverse. Learning is a constant as Gregory Cajete (1994) writes “...we are continuously engaged in the art of making meaning and creating our world through the unique of human learning” (p. 25). In other words, the processes of learning are without any boundaries, such as the walls of the classroom. Furthermore, incorporating this teaching methodology contributes to decolonizing education and the processes of teaching and learning by reimagining the transmission of knowledge.

To effectively navigate challenging conversations at our dinner tables by talking truth means our perceptions of learning spaces must undergo decolonization. For example, aside from the walls of “the classroom”, what information and conversations are students privy to? By drawing from the totality of my learning experiences, I was privy to learning in decolonial learning spaces at dinner tables with my parents, my teachers, Indigenous Elders, and Knowledge Carriers, both while having dinner at homes and at restaurants. The characteristics of these decolonial learning spaces was 1) Indigenous ways of Knowing flowing from Indigenous Knowledge systems were centered in the conversation; 2) both parties practiced vulnerability; and 3) people practiced truthfulness, no matter the difficulty of conversations. To some, talks at dinner tables may be “unconventional” learning spaces, and thus may be reject. However, know that dinner table conversations or “talks” are strategic spaces to re-imagine as learning spaces.

Through modelling the targeting the dinner table talks as pedagogy as the teaching methodology in the course EDUC 391: *Pedagogy of Indigenous Arts*, students practiced the conversational method, or *the method*. Instead of listening to lectures on Indigenous arts, students refined their conversational skills that support the mobilization of knowledge and promoting truth telling. As active participants in weekly conversations spanning the winter semester of 2021 under the guidance of an Indigenous faculty member at Brock University, conversations pushed students to be vulnerable, embrace discomfort, take risks, and make actionable strides to move forward Truth and Reconciliation. In many ways, the skills acquired are transferable beyond the classroom. In closing, when conversations are correctly executed

the outcome leads to transformative learning and tackles prejudices of Indigenous peoples in Canada and ignorance of the lasting intergenerational effects of Canada's Indian Residential School System.