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 undo conventional ways of being in the classroom. Taking risks can foster an appreciation and critical understanding of indigenous knowledge, and it can lead to cultural appropriation. We, a mixed-race Canadian man and an indigenous Ugandan woman from Ghana, have been to the African continent, and are committed to the revitalization of indigenous sciences as alternative development pathways. Since 2013, we have led courses with a diverse set of participants from Canada, Central America, the Caribbean, Middle East, Africa and Asia. We challenge ourselves each time to go beyond the traditional curiosity of knowing, and to engage in a spirit of appreciation. Efforts need to be made to help all educators teach and learn through the classroom itself. The value of this perspective was confirmed for us every time we worked with and heard from indigenous guest speakers and the learners they had brought with them.

However, we have always felt our own responsibility to transform our own multicultural communities, to the core. Risk-taking in university multicultural classrooms has peaked participants awareness of the importance of knowing and decolonizing language. Many participants, and they saw the connection between this new awareness and the potential for powerful expressions, encouraged social learning and an appreciation for diversity within their classroom. Over the two weeks of the course a beautiful abstract art piece was shared. We saw the potential of the seeds of the potential for learning that is planted in people during the course.

EXPERIMENTAL ACTIVITIES

1. MORNING MYSTICA

Every morning in the first week of the course we offered a simple activity from our Mi’kmaw heritage. Medical researchers described this traditional morning practice as “grandfathers” and are treated with special respect, or “witnesses” to the course. They were respected for the insights they provide to one’s personal life. We have been honored to have many indigenous guest speakers in our classes, and have also served as facilitators and co-facilitators we offered a simple activity from our Mi’kmaw colleagues and they shared their perspective with us.

2. SHARING COLONIAL STORIES AND FEELINGS ON PAPER

We began the day with a plenary discussion about colonialism and our own experiences. We wanted to hear participants stories and feelings they wanted to let go of on paper. We then worked in small groups to share, and followed with a plenary session to capture similarities and differences from these stories.

3. MORNING MYSTICA

The Chuang, or ancient Chinese Book of Changes is a 64-message or symbol based upon nature as a means of self-discipline. The exercise has helped set the atmosphere and nurtured a spirit of appreciation. Efforts need to be made to help all educators teach and learn through the classroom itself. The value of this perspective was confirmed for us every time we worked with and heard from indigenous guest speakers and the learners they had brought with them.

4. EXPERIENCES FOR CONNECTING TO NATURE

The language activities were useful, but in many cases participants had learned the indigenous languages of their country. They often spoke many languages. We taught them the importance of respect and cooperation to complete this assignment. The risk seemed to be useful in helping us understand the importance of knowing and decolonizing language.

5. THE I CHING WORKBOOK AS A WAY TO TAP ANCIENT KNOWLEDGE

During the course we spent lots of time in classrooms, much of it discussing our relationship to the land and our own histories. We also had the opportunity to share our cultural knowledge with each other in a creative and productive way. We have been able to provide meaningful insights to one another.

6. VALUES CATEGORIES FOR PERSONAL DISCOVERY

The day began with a plenary discussion about values and what personal values mean to us. The exercise has helped set the atmosphere and nurtured a spirit of appreciation. Efforts need to be made to help all educators teach and learn through the classroom itself. The value of this perspective was confirmed for us every time we worked with and heard from indigenous guest speakers and the learners they had brought with them.

7. COLLECTIVE CONSTRUCTION OF A SEED MANDALA FOR LEARNING REFLECTION

We took on a strong evangelical tone where others did not feel comfortable. During the course we spent lots of time in classrooms, much of it discussing our relationship to the land and our own histories. We also had the opportunity to share our cultural knowledge with each other in a creative and productive way. We have been able to provide meaningful insights to one another.

8. TENSIONS AND CRITIQUE

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

In one case a mystica facilitated by a participant took on a more challenging format. When some had trouble understanding the indigenous languages of their country. They often spoke many languages. We took the opportunity to help them understand the importance of respect and cooperation to complete this assignment.

Therefore, we have taken risks to build experimental activities into our course to reincorporate the indigenous knowledge paradigm. Activities start with people’s experiences to carve out space for learning and move towards actions. This approach resonates with the First Peoples Knowledge of the world, captured by Kaminski and Corrie (2017) in Diagram 1.

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

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 experimental activities for a settler, dominant culture classroom? Are there other activities that could work in a subtle way to get people engaged from a more holistic perspective?

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