

## **Crafting Culturally Safe Learning Spaces: A Story of Collaboration Between an Educational Institution and Two First Nation Communities**

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**ABSTRACT** This is a story of crafting a culturally safe learning space in the context of First Nations communities. It is told by two nurse educators working together, one who is Indigenous and one who is not. The word “crafting” is used to describe the collaborative and aesthetic process of co-constructing learning with students, community members and the environment. The relationship between the educational institution and the First Nations communities was guided by the concept of cultural safety. Cultural safety politicizes the notion of culture and disrupts the power imbalance between nurses and the people they work with. A process of collaborative conscientization was used to decolonize our institution and ourselves. This led to new possibilities of crafting an ethical learning space where Eurocentric ideologies could be dislodged from the center in order for Indigenous ways of knowing and learning to emerge. Students experienced a form of relational accountability for their learning through participation in community ceremonies and protocols. What resulted was a unique and transformative learning experience for fourth year Bachelor of Science in Nursing students offered in collaboration between an educational institution and two remote First Nations communities.

**KEYWORDS** decolonization; indigenous knowledge; cultural safety; nursing education

Since 2007, North Island College has been collaborating with the Wuikinuxv and Dzawada’enuxw Nations to offer a unique field school experience for fourth year nursing students as part of an advanced nursing elective. The experience of developing, implementing and evaluating this field school involves an uncovering of the Eurocentric processes embedded in educational institutions. It requires education, practice, and community to develop new ways of forming relationships and new processes for working together (Battiste, 2013). Through engaging with each other, we began to decolonize our institutions and ourselves. What resulted was the crafting of an ethical learning space in partnership with community, where the possibility of Indigenous ways of knowing and learning could emerge (Ermine, Sinclair, & Jeffery, 2004). What is learned, and, more importantly, how it is learned, emerges as the field school unfolds and is influenced by all who are involved. Accountability for learning is established through protocols and ceremony in relationship with community (Wilson, 2008). The field school is taught or “crafted” by Evelyn, a nurse and North Island College Elder,

from the Dzawada'enuxw Nation, and by Joanna, a non-native nurse educator. We choose to see our role as “crafting” in order to describe the collaborative and aesthetic process of co-constructing our learning with the students, community members and with the environment. This is our story of crafting a culturally safe learning space through a process of collaborative conscientization (Battiste, 2013).

The field school is offered as part of an advanced nursing elective, Health and Wellness in Aboriginal Communities. Originally, the course was delivered in a typical classroom setting where First Nations' knowledge keepers were invited to participate. The involvement of First Nations people was provided generously with minimal remuneration. Although Indigenous ways of sharing knowledge were supported, control of the learning environment remained largely in the hands of the instructor. The learning space remained subject to the multiple forms of institutional hegemony that are afforded to academia (Battiste, 2013). What we learned is that our educational processes, no matter how well intentioned, continued to perpetuate dominant Eurocentric values and consequently continued to oppress Indigenous ways of knowing and learning (Battiste, 2013).

Recognizing the limitations of the way the course was initially structured, we began to engage in a process of collaborative conscientization with individuals through practice, education and community. Battiste (2013) describes collaborative conscientization, from the perspective of an Indigenous educator, as consisting of two important steps. The first is developing awareness of the “colonial and neo-colonial practices that continue to marginalize and racialize Indigenous students” (Battiste, 2013, p. 69). The second step is to “convince them [Eurocentrically educated Canadians] to acknowledge the unique knowledge and relationships that Indigenous people derive from place and from their homeland” (Battiste, 2013, p. 69).

Nurses, along with all other professionals and people educated in Canada, have been subjected to a process of cognitive imperialism that has made it difficult to value other ways of knowing (Battiste, 2013). Cognitive imperialism is considered to be the universal application of an Eurocentric worldview to determine what constitutes reality and truth over all other worldviews (Battiste & Henderson, 2000, p. 37). All people educated in the Western tradition, including those educated in residential schools, need to go through a process of unlearning and unknowing in order to respect and honour the unique knowledge that Indigenous people and communities hold. The process of decolonizing both our institutions and ourselves is a political process that disrupts the power structures used to promote an Eurocentric worldview. For those of us who have been afforded the privilege of being aligned in some way with these power structures, such as through birth or education, it can be a painful process of exposing and uncovering our vulnerabilities. I (Evelyn) experienced this when I went to work with my people as a nurse. I realized that I held judgments against them for the way they were behaving. I didn't understand why they were drinking and not looking after themselves. I had to learn about how my people had been colonized and then I had to learn about myself. This had a big impact on me. Now I don't judge my people. Instead, I am amazed at the miracles of people who have overcome hardship and become healthy by reconnecting with their culture and with themselves. We must all go through a process of decolonizing ourselves, and our institutions,

in order to disrupt the power held by Western ideologies and reclaim Indigenous knowledge systems (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2012).

Nurses in particular need to examine the ways we have taken up ideologies around the concept of culture. Our understanding of cultural competency has been largely informed by Leininger's (1999) Transcultural Nursing Theory with a focus on identifying differences in cultural practices. This has, in many cases, led nurses to believe that we can become culturally competent through learning about the traits and traditions of different cultural groups. There is a risk of viewing the mainstream or dominant culture as being the cultureless norm that all other people who we identify as different, are compared to. The risk of essentializing culture and applying our knowledge assumptions to people whom we perceive as belonging to a cultural group is that it tends to racialize and stigmatize them (Smith, 2012). What we need to understand is that culture is not a neutral concept, but rather that it can be used to privilege and oppress groups of people (Battiste, 2013; Smith, 2012).

Discourse on cultural safety, a concept originally derived from nursing education in Aotearoa, New Zealand, politicizes the notion of culturally competent nursing practice (Papps & Ramsden, 1996). Nurses need to see their cultural location as being in relation with the political and personal context of the people they work with (Doane & Varcoe, 2015). Ideas of cultural safety disrupt the notion that nurses can determine if they are providing culturally competent care. Instead it gives power to the person receiving the nurses' care to decide if the relationship is culturally safe or not (Papps & Ramsden 1996). This is consistent with the National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO) position statement that "Cultural safety refers to what is felt or experienced by a patient when a health care provider communicates with the patient in a respectful, inclusive way, empowers the patient in decision-making and builds a health care relationship where the patient and provider work together as a team to ensure maximum effectiveness of care. Culturally safe encounters require that health care providers treat patients with the understanding that not all individuals in a group act the same way or have the same beliefs" (NAHO, 2008, p 19). Cultural safety as described in the practice framework of the Aboriginal Nurses Association of Canada includes a focus on the nurses' role in addressing unequal power relations and in recognizing that all nurses and patients are bearers of culture (Hart-Wasekeesikaw, 2009). During the field school experience, we were told by an Elder from the community that "when you know you have full understanding of one another, and feel comfortable because you have found yourself, you feel you belong" (G. Johnson, personal communication, June, 12 2007). We believe that cultural safety is not a goal or a competency but a process of uncovering ourselves in relationship with others. In order to engage with each other in a way that opens our hearts and our minds, we need to experience the paradox of feeling safe enough to be vulnerable. It is a political act of resisting the forces of othering and seeking places of belonging together (Cash et al, 2013). We strove to engage with community members in a culturally safe way throughout all aspects of crafting the field school.

In 2005, at an inaugural meeting of what was to become the Learning Circles for Aboriginal Nursing (LCAN), we began a discourse on cultural safety. LCAN is a consortium of First Nations

Health Authorities, nursing education institutions, and Aboriginal organizations. LCAN's vision is "Staying Connected to the Circle...Changing Hearts." Their mission is to create culturally safe learning and practice environments for students, nurses, clients, communities and institutions (LCAN Memorandum of Understanding, 2008). LCAN provided a forum for discourse aimed at untangling the dominant worldviews embedded in nursing education and practice that continue to oppress Aboriginal people (Doane & Varcoe, 2015). At an LCAN workshop entitled *Integrating Culture into Practice*, an Aboriginal leader asked why we weren't "integrating practice into culture" (F. Johnson, personal communication, April 7, 2006). This question illuminated how we were still viewing nursing practice as the central experience that culture needed to be integrated into. In order to dislodge our power structures, we recognized the need to place First Nations people and their homelands in the center of our relationships. We needed to integrate our practice as nurses into the lived world of First Nations people. This elder invited us to bring nursing students to learn in his remote community. This opened up opportunities to realize Battiste's (2013) second stage of collaborative conscientization and to acknowledge that learning with First Nations people requires learning in the context of their homeland. What began to emerge was a shared vision for a field school where nursing practice and education could be integrated into existing community culture. This preliminary stage of decolonizing both our institutions and ourselves through relationship building and collaborative conscientization was fundamental to the eventual crafting of a culturally safe learning space where Indigenous ways of knowing and learning could emerge.

An important part of crafting a culturally safe learning space during both the development and implementation phases of the field school involved developing a shared understanding of the four "R's." Originally the four "R's" of "Relationship," "Respect," "Relevance," and "Reciprocity" were identified by Kirkness and Barnhardt (1991) as principles for Indigenizing postsecondary education. As each participant, including students, instructors, and community members, shared their personal meaning of these principles, we began to co-construct or craft a deeper understanding of how we wanted to be together. The meaning of the "R's" has had specific relevance for the field school experience. The first "R," Relationship, guides us as the context for our learning. Students come to experience a deeper connection to the environment and to all living systems (Rasmussen & Akulukjuk, 2009). The second "R," Respect, is seen as unconditional positive regard for all people because they are human. Respect is also recognized as essential in sharing the deeply personal nature of each other's stories (Archibald, 2008). Relevance, the third "R," is found in the authentic relationships that are developed based on the real experiences of community members and participants (Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991). Finally the fourth "R," Reciprocity, reminds us to be aware of the moral and ethical impacts of our relationships with each other, and of the need to actively engage in decolonizing ourselves and our institutions (Smith, 2012). Additional "R's" have subsequently been added by community members and participants. "Revealing" was added to mean exposing power, using understandable language, and recognizing differences in assumptions, values, and beliefs (Smith, 2012). "Reverence" reminds us to be open to wonder and appreciation for the unknown and unexpected (Wilson, 2008). Importantly, from the

Aboriginal worldview, reverence means gratitude. (P.Willie, personal communication, June 11, 2007). “Rights” were an important reminder to know our history, particularly as it pertains to the rights of Aboriginal people (Battiste, 2013). It also came to represent the right to be who you are, to be visible, and to respect yourself. These principles were incorporated into every aspect of the field school.

The field school, as one component of the advanced nursing elective, occurs over the course of seven days in one of two remote First Nations communities on the Central Coast of British Columbia. Two other components of the course were also developed and refined over the past ten years in an effort to support and extend the learning that occurs during the field school. The first is an online component designed to prepare students for the field school experience. The focus is on developing foundational knowledge related to Canadian colonial history and contemporary issues effecting the health and wellbeing of Indigenous people. The final component, completed after the field school, is a reciprocal learning project. The project is designed by the students with the goal of making their learning visible to themselves and to others including the First Nations community that the field school is held in. It is also expected that the project will be a giving back to the community or a paying forward of the experience in some way. Some examples of reciprocal learning projects are the creation of art pieces, the public sharing of the experiences in a variety of forums, the influencing of practice, policy and curricular changes in a variety of organizations. There is a continuous cycle of reflection and learning with the community in order to craft learning experiences that are congruent with indigenous forms of pedagogy.

The first field school occurred in June of 2007 in Rivers Inlet with the Wuikinuxv Nation. Following our first field school, we wrote the following reflections that demonstrate the differing orientations we had as instructors to this learning experience.

Evelyn’s reflection: As we traveled northward to the land of the Hamatsa, I did not feel any apprehension as I had been there many times. As a child, with my whole family, I had traveled to the fishing grounds of the Inlet. Then I became their Community Health Nurse when I was located in Bella Bella, and they opted to come with me when I moved to Port Hardy. So I serviced the health needs of this beautiful village for a number of years. But even before all this, I was connected to these people, for my great-great grandmother originated from this valley. So these people are my people. Every time I come here, I am greeted, “Welcome Home.” I still go there a lot, for they call upon me to help with their potlatches. However, because this has never been done before, bringing students to a First Nations village for their learning, I did have some questions going through my mind as I watched the waves rising and falling in that big Pacific Ocean. How will the program turn out? Will the students adapt to this way of learning? Will they have open minds and be flexible enough to embrace the differences? Will they find themselves?

Joanna’s reflection: As a nursing instructor, I felt accountable for the success of this course to the organizations within the community, and to the individuals involved.

I found myself caught between the academic world of evaluation, standards and measurable learning outcomes, and the need to value other ways of knowing and doing. My role, as I saw it, was to become a crafter of learning spaces where other voices could be heard and individuals would feel safe to examine their own cultural assumptions and identify their own learning. I felt my own vulnerability in the process of letting go of my assumptions about my role as a nurse educator. I found myself in a continual process of building structure with the community, the organizations, and the individuals involved with what we would be doing and learning. At the same time, I was tearing down those same structures because of the assumptions and expectations of learning embedded in them. It was more like building with wet sand than strong beams.

Through a process of critical reflection and collaborative conscientization, each successive field school experience became a unique weaving of different world views. The experience is co-constructed by all those involved with relationship and community as the context for learning. It is politicized by making the cultural intersections and tensions explicit in the weaving together of Indigenous and Western worldviews (Doane & Varcoe, 2015). Eurocentric assumptions and values about knowledge and learning are still present, but they are dislodged from the center, allowing space for other ways of knowing and learning to emerge (Battiste, 2013, p. 104).

On arrival in the community, students are billeted, ideally with local host families. Through sharing stories and living with host families, students became more aware of the effects of colonization and the privileging of some peoples' experiences over others' (Smith, 2012). The living arrangements encourage the opportunity to develop meaningful interpersonal relationships through story sharing, where deep learning can occur (Archibald, 2008). Participants also experience their own vulnerability as they become dependent on their hosts for basic needs such as food and shelter. Students have the opportunity to uncover their own assumptions, values, and unexamined privilege as they learn to live in the context of their host family's lives.

During the week-long field school, our classroom was the Big House, our ceremonial and spiritual building. As we entered the Big House, we learned protocols for awakening the ancestors and asking for guidance in our learning. We learned about the knowledge keepers of the community, who are represented in the four corner poles and cross beams that hold up the very structure of the building. A man from the community looked after the fire for us daily. He started it and kept it going for as long as we had need. We also began and concluded our sessions with a prayer. It is very important in the First Nations culture to thank the Creator for everything in our lives. Community members were encouraged to participate, and the door was open for all who wanted to join us. This was something different from the standard classroom setting where it would have been considered an intrusion, but we did not feel that. One day we were honored by the presence of the elders. The elders shared stories of long ago, about how life was before contact. Some of them even recounted stories of their negative experiences in the residential schools. We learned so much from these stories. My (Evelyn's) brother works

in the community, and he contributed to a lot of the lessons the nurses received. He made us realize that we all have a dance, that it is one of the special gifts we receive in our lives. He told us the history of the land, its origin, as well as many other lessons. The learning was constructed in relationship with community and happened in the context of peoples' lives. Minimal structure was imposed on the learning experience so that authentic opportunities to be in relationship with community members could emerge. What we experienced was an ethical space of learning where Indigenous ways of knowing and Indigenous knowledge were valued.

The idea of ethical space has been applied to the bringing together of Eurocentric and Indigenous knowledge systems in a research context by Willie Ermine. Ermine describes an ethical space as an "in-between" space where the power imbalance of Western knowledge systems and Indigenous knowledge systems can be dislodged (Ermine, Sinclair, & Jeffery, 2004, p.20). It is a space where Indigenous and non-Indigenous people can engage critically in deconstructing their shared history and in reconstructing a decolonized future (Ermine, Sinclair, & Jeffery, 2004, p.20). Marie Battiste (2013) describes this ethical space in an educational context as contentious, but also offering exciting possibilities (p.105). The challenge of creating an ethical space in education lies in resisting the forces of colonization that have created the classroom in the first place (Hampton, 1995, p.37). The physical set-up of a typical classroom supports didactic teaching styles and disconnects students from being in relationship with each other and with the natural environment. Cajete (2000) describes education from the Indigenous perspective as "being about finding face, finding heart, finding foundation and doing that in context of family, of community, of relationships with a whole environment" (p.188). By situating the learning experience in the Big House and not imposing external structures on the experience, we experienced exciting possibilities where Indigenous knowledge and ways of learning could be shared.

A typical afternoon during our stay in the community would include an outing. We would go crab gathering, berry picking and hiking. Some of the nurses even helped me (Evelyn) by picking some herbs that are used to relieve pain. Students experienced learning in relationship with the environment and developed their own connections with environment, community, and wellness. The importance of this way of learning is best described by Tommy Akulukjuk who said, "To educate by books about the environment is to belittle the environment, to make it less than us: and makes us think that we are the kings of this world and we hold the fate of this world. Little do we know that the environment holds us rather than us holding it" (Rasmussen & Akulukjuk, 2009, p. 289).

During the course of the week, students had the opportunity to attend community events and ceremonies. These events included a welcoming dinner and a ceremonial closing feast. During the closing feast, community members shared traditional dances and ceremonies with the students. Because First Nations communities value reciprocity, the students were guided in a gift-giving ceremony as a way of formally thanking the community for their teachings. The formal and informal ceremonies and protocols we engaged in connected us to the place and to the people we were learning from. This taught us about the accountability we have

to the community for what we have learned. This is a form of relational accountability that requires a high level of personal integrity (Wilson, 2008, p. 102). It is a very different form of accountability from what is expected in the typical post-secondary classroom. Such relational accountability is exemplified by the following student comments after the field school: : “I believe that the gift we were given is rare and special, and that it was given to us by the people of Wuikinunxv, not lightly, but with the responsibility to carry it with us into our practice”; “No book or history lesson could have touched me so deeply. What is our social conscience? Our ignorance is not excusable, our silence stings.” These comments illustrate the responsibility that students have not only to be accountable to the community for what they have learned, but to be accountable for incorporating that learning into their future practice.

Western forms of education have tended to reduce accountability for learning to the achievement of a measurable letter grade based solely on Eurocentric standards. These standards are articulated to students in the form of learning objectives and measurable outcomes for each course. This requires educators to make an assumption that there are measurable competencies for working with Aboriginal people that can be uncovered and categorized by non-Indigenous people. In order for Indigenous ways of knowing and learning to emerge, these Eurocentric structures need to be disrupted. Hampton (1995) describes the intentional and hostile process in which educational standards have perpetuated one way of knowing as superior to all others (p. 37). In order to honour the profoundly personal nature of the learning that occurs in relationship with the community, evaluation of the students learning is not incorporated into the field school component of the course. Evaluation for the other two components of the course are done collaboratively with the students in ways that are consistent with co-constructed forms of pedagogy. The deconstruction of accepted educational practices around evaluation led to the possibility of new ways for students to be accountable for their learning during the field school. What emerged was the crafting of curriculum with a respect for community protocols and Indigenous ways of knowing (Battiste, 2013). This requires people with multiple types of authority within the educational system to be willing to contest Eurocentric educational assumptions and to recognize different ways of constructing learning as being at least equally valid. It is in this political arena and ethical space where exciting possibilities, including Indigenous forms of pedagogy, can emerge.

This is our story of crafting a culturally safe learning space through collaboration between an educational institution and two First Nations communities. We have learned that we have all been influenced by cognitive imperialism to support a Eurocentric ideology in education (Battiste, 2013). To move forward, a willingness to take personal and political action is required to change the existing hegemony by all those involved. An ethical space can be created when Eurocentric ideologies are dislodged from the center allowing for Indigenous ways of knowing and learning to emerge. This requires a continuous process of critical reflection and collaborative conscientization to uncover and counter the effects of cognitive imperialism. Engaging in this process has been transformational for us, our institution and for our students. We experienced a relational way of learning that established a respect for Indigenous knowledge, ceremony, and connection to the environment (Hampton, 1995, p. 18). The field



school experience is an act of resistance against the colonization of education (Smith, 2012). It is an example of engaging in new ways of learning in collaboration with Indigenous people that has the potential to benefit all learners and the communities they learn in.

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