

# Humility and the Hoop Dance: A Teacher's Reflections on Indigenous Knowledge and Power Sharing in the Classroom

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Résumé de l'article

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## **HUMILITY AND THE HOOP DANCE: A TEACHER'S REFLECTIONS ON INDIGENOUS KNOWLEDGE AND POWER SHARING IN THE CLASSROOM**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This research reflects on my collaboration with an Indigenous hoop dancer to respond to the Calls to Action from the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. The research engages the Anishinaabeg seven sacred teachings and critical decolonizing pedagogy as theoretical frameworks and qualitative inquiry as methodology. This paper presents partial findings of the research, focusing on my own reflections on humility and its complex connections to power sharing, collaboration, and Indigenous knowledge in the arts. I introduce the "humility pendulum," which is a conceptual tool that I developed to support my own critical reflection throughout the process.*

**KEY WORDS:** Arts education; Critical pedagogy; Decolonizing pedagogy; Education; Hoop dance; Humility; Indigenous education; Music education; Ontario; Truth and reconciliation

### **INTRODUCTION**

Released in 2015, the final report of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) of Canada is a comprehensive account of the experiences of survivors from residential schools and a roadmap for achieving reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples in the country now known as Canada. The impacts of the TRC's 94 Calls to Action extend to all Canadians, particularly challenging those in the education system to better cater to students while fostering essential conversations about Indigenous sovereignty and cultural rights. Specifically, Calls to Action 10 and 63, which call upon the federal government to adequately fund legislation that incorporates the principles of developing culturally

appropriate curricula and building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect (TRC, 2015, pp. 2-7).

As a music teacher, I responded to these calls to action by collaborating with Beany John, a local Indigenous hoop dancer and knowledge holder. I identify as a white, cis-gendered woman of Polish and Ukrainian settler descent, and I teach on the Treaty 20 and Williams Treaty territory of the Michi Saagiig Mississauga Anishinaabeg. Beany John (she/they) is Plains Cree and Taino, from Kehewin Cree Nation. She is an award-winning hoop dancer and educator and identifies as Indigiqueer/Two Spirit (John, n.d.). Beany and I met as university students and developed a friendly relationship. Using a combination of both school and personal funds, I was eager to hire Beany to share her deep knowledge of Indigenous culture and hoop dance with my students. Together, we implemented a seven-week cross-curricular hoop dance unit that connected music, dance, drama, and art curricula. Throughout this process, numerous insights were gained, which I analyzed and interpreted using the theoretical framework of the seven good life teachings of the Anishinaabeg (Toulouse, 2008, 2011).

Broadly, the hoop dance unit asked the question: In what ways will a seven-week Indigenous hoop dance unit, taught by an Indigenous performing artist and facilitated by a white teacher, contribute to reconciliation in an elementary school classroom in Ontario (Hill, 2019)? This paper explores a secondary question that emerged throughout the process: How does humility contribute to the collaborative process, and how can engaging humility enhance my professional practice? I explore the role of critical and decolonizing pedagogy in collaborative efforts, cultural humility and the “humility pendulum,” and sharing power in the classroom. To support my exploration, I share insights from students and a personal reflective journal. I offer suggestions regarding the involvement of non-Indigenous educators in collaborative decolonization efforts that could be valuable to teachers and administrators. Ultimately, I believe that Beany John’s teaching modelled humility and served as an antidote to individualism within our classroom.

## METHODOLOGY

Over a span of two months, Beany and I worked with a grade six class on a weekly basis. Beany imparted traditional teachings associated with the hoop dance, facilitated the collaborative creation of hoops with the students, and provided guidance in choreography development. Although the hoop dance is sometimes associated with a healing dance that originated with the Pueblo people of the American Southwest and subsequently spread north through the pow-wow circuit (Browner, 2002), it was chosen as the instructional dance medium for this project because of its historical and contemporary significance to the Anishinaabeg people of Ontario and because of Beany’s expertise with the dance. In his book *The Manitous: The Spiritual World of the Ojibway*, Indigenous scholar Basil Johnson (2001)—Chippewas of Nawash Unceded First Nation—tells the story of the Manitou Pukawiss, who creates the hoop dance to explore and enact human struggle and emotion. As contemporary Anishinaabeg dancers craft their own hoop dances and create their own “pictures,” they are participating in this process of struggle, healing, and storytelling. These dancers are enactors rather than actors, experiencing pain and victory on the stage and sharing their experience

with the audience. As a culminating event, the class performed their dance for the entire school community during our spring concert. To everyone's delight and excitement, Beany surprised us with a solo hoop dance performance to conclude the concert (Hill, 2019).

Each week, I facilitated 40-minute sharing circles and ongoing written, oral, and arts-based reflection activities that enacted the Ontario curriculum and served as part of the music and drama instruction for the class. Drawing on my experience as an educator, I developed the materials for reflection and data collection, tailoring them to suit the specific needs of the class. Students were invited to journal, brainstorm, share their ideas with small groups, ask questions, and create art. To support the diverse learning styles in the class, I offered students the freedom to choose written, oral, or creative modes of communication and I was available to act as a scribe for students who wished to communicate through text but preferred not to write. Beany assumed the responsibility for all hoop dance-related content, sharing teachings, techniques, and practice strategies in the 90 minutes prior to the reflection activities.

Throughout the process, an open-ended journal was kept in which I recorded my personal reflections and thoughts. This journal was a place for me to express and refine developing ideas, release emotions as they arose, express frustration with challenges that occurred, and document my own personal opinions without burdening my students with ill-considered or reactive responses. Journaling provided a valuable means to uncover and interrogate my own colonial attitudes and practices which might have otherwise remained unnoticed. Throughout this process, I was also present as a participant observer, recording anecdotal observations and taking pictures of the activities. Employing a constructivist grounded theory approach, I analyzed the data using qualitative coding techniques, assigning thematic categories based on my own subjective perspectives and expertise (Creswell, 2012; Saldana, 2015). I considered the principles of "crystallization," striving to be open to different ways of knowing and the potential that arises from combining and creating knowledge (Ellingson, 2009).

## **THEORY**

### **The Seven Sacred Teachings**

The hoop dance project responded to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission Calls to Action, numbers 10 and 63, which ask the federal government to sufficiently fund legislation that incorporates the following principles: "... developing culturally appropriate curricula" (p. 2) and "building student capacity for intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect" (p. 7). Theoretically, I was guided by the Anishinaabeg seven sacred teachings as taught by Ojibwe/Odawa educator and author Pamela Toulouse (2008, 2011, 2013), who draws from Anishinaabe Chief, author, and philosopher Eddie Benton-Banai (1988). In the Anishinaabe language, the seven sacred teachings are Nibwaakaawin (wisdom), Zaagi'idiwin (love), Minaadendamowin (respect), Aakode'ewin (bravery), Gwayakwaadiziwin (honesty), Dabaadendiziwin (humility), and Debwewin (truth) (Absolon, 2011; Bell & Brant, 2015; Toulouse 2008, 2011, 2013). I believe that these seven traditional teachings were a meaningful basis upon which to build this project, not only because they inform Indigenous knowledge in the arts, but also because frequent reflection and referral to the teachings

helped remind me to remain connected to the “higher” purpose of research, which is to benefit society (Absolon, 2011; Battiste, 2013). I employed these teachings as a personal guide throughout the project and utilized them as a framework to evaluate student engagement and emerging data. This paper discusses this humility teaching, using teacher researcher reflection and student contributions as data.

### **Critical and Decolonizing Pedagogy**

In his 1968 book *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, Brazilian scholar Paulo Freire (1968) deconstructs and critiques hegemonic pedagogy, using Marxist class analysis to examine the relationship between colonizer and colonized on the macro level and in the classroom. Critical pedagogy theorists use his work to advance social justice objectives by examining power dynamics within learning environments and by reimagining the relationship between teacher and learner. Freire imagines the learner as a co-creator of knowledge, as opposed to an empty vessel to be filled with knowledge. To this end, in creating an environment where the learner is the co-creator of knowledge, Freire posits that awareness of and freedom from power dynamics must be achieved. He explains that the power dynamics between the oppressor and the oppressed, somewhat counterintuitively, are generally stable. The oppressed can be afraid of freedom or unaware of how to pursue it. In this way, “status quo” power dynamics can remain in place for extended periods of time. Freire believes that all people in this scenario are incomplete and must strive to become more fully aware. To free the oppressed, various approaches must be taken using cooperation, unity, organization, and cultural synthesis. Freedom in learning, through a multiplicity of cooperative approaches, is achieved through praxis, as theory or practice alone will not be sufficient in this field of work. Freire explains that freedom and balanced power dynamics in learning are characteristics of humanization, whereas oppression in pedagogy results in dehumanization. So, our vocation above being a teacher or a learner, an oppressor or an oppressed, is to be a human in the process (Freire, 1968).

However, while Freire’s critical pedagogy has long served as a valuable foundational framework for building educational practices, it has faced criticism for its perceived inadequacy in addressing deeply entrenched colonial practices in education. Educational theorist Michalinos Zembylas (2018) suggests that Freirean theory and critical pedagogy place too central a focus on class and binary categories, such as oppressor and oppressed. He argues that critical theory must be revisited and indeed reinvented as decolonizing pedagogy and that decolonial thinking can significantly strengthen critical thinking (Zembylas, 2018). Engaging the empathy and social justice scholarship of Carolyn Pedwell (2012, 2016), Zembylas presents empathy as an important feature of decolonizing pedagogy, positing that Freirean thinking has not sufficiently addressed affective knowledge. However, he cautions that empathy must itself be decolonized and the place of the researcher as a complicit colonial actor must be interrogated. Pedwell suggests “alternative empathies” which call upon individuals to reflect on their ongoing perpetuation of coloniality and which exist outside the dominant social imaginaries (Pedwell, 2016). Thus, a decolonizing pedagogy of empathy is presented, which emphasizes “action-oriented empathy and solidarity relationships that seriously engage the demand posed by decolonization without falling into the traps of naïve multiculturalism or liberal cosmopolitanism” (Zembylas, 2018,

p. 415). I draw parallels between Zembylas's presentation of empathy as a necessary component in praxis-oriented decolonization and Toulouse's (2011) explanation of the sacred teaching of love: "In Anishinabek teachings, love is described as an action word. Love is the first goodlife teaching that is presented to children, and it is at the heart of all things" (p. 42).

Both critical pedagogy and decolonizing pedagogy demand participation in the learning process and are valuable theories to consider in the hoop dance praxis. They are also highly relevant to our discussion of humility, as humility deals directly with power dynamics in the classroom. The students with the "loudest voices" often influence the direction of the lesson and therefore hold an unequal share of power. Some students speak frequently during class discussions, offer their opinions, and pose questions more often than their classmates. Information that a teacher has planned to review may be postponed or skipped altogether if one or two vocal students direct the lesson elsewhere. We like to believe that all students have the freedom to speak up and ask questions in this way, but in practice we see that they do not. In fact, if all students participated verbally as much as the notable few, there would simply not be enough time in the school day to cover the content. So, perhaps unconsciously, we assume and indeed "count on" a percentage of quiet students when we teach to ensure the smooth delivery of the material. The students seem to understand this and fall into roles, with some claiming disproportionate space, attention, and power.

Students who frequently ask questions and participate in class discussion largely operate within the classroom guidelines. However, there are others who seek power in more direct ways. These are the students who test boundaries, distract from the material at hand, and habitually act outside classroom norms. Their behaviours and actions can be minor, or somewhat more dramatic, but regardless of their escalation level, they do not just request attention in the classroom, they demand it. Some days, I know that a significant percentage of my energy and of the time spent in class is dedicated to managing diverse student needs. This greatly shifts the power dynamics in the class, now skewed towards the few who are requiring that instructional time be directed towards them. Teachers generally consider these students when planning lessons and will frequently "teach around them." The skill and experience of the teacher play a significant role in attempting to balance power dynamics among students and within the classroom. However, despite the teacher's efforts, these power dynamics persist. We observed that the hoop dance classroom was no exception.

## DISCUSSION

### **Examining Beany John's Approach: Humility, Pedagogy, and Deconstructing Colonial and Neoliberal Constructs**

I believe that throughout the hoop dance project, Beany John's teaching strategies subtly but powerfully unsettled a prevalent neoliberal framework and modelled humility. Beany's teaching emphasized strength and individuality as well as group cohesion and respect. Beany offered her knowledge but also shared the space with the students:

When putting them (the hoops) together, Beany asked students to help her, although it probably would have been easier to do it without the students. Does

she do this so that they feel a personal connection and ownership to that hoop? I believe so. I would not naturally do this, but started, following Beany's lead. (Personal journal, 2019)

On the first day of the project, we started constructing the hoops and very few instructions were given. Instead, Beany jumped right into the practical business of putting the hoops together and the students followed. There is one step that involves putting a glue-laden wooden dowel into the open ends of the PVC pipe, thus fitting them together. However, the dowel is extremely tight, and it takes significant force to fit everything together properly. Though I don't consider myself to be particularly weak, I struggled with this step, using near maximum effort to get the job done and I assumed that the students would have a terrible time with the task. However, although it was true that some of the students needed assistance, Beany suggested that they help each other, both holding the hoop and pressing it together over the dowel as a team. I could see that perhaps speed was not the goal here. I followed suit and started working on this step in tandem with the students, and they started helping each other as well. With this one, simple introductory task, we had shifted the focus from teacher centred and individual work to group focused effort.

She tries not to move ahead until everyone has it. (Personal journal, 2019)

From the beginning, Beany also emphasized moving through the steps as a group, with individual pacing but also without leaving anyone behind. She said several times to work at a pace that felt appropriate and that the steps did not necessarily need to be completed sequentially. I was curious as to whether this would de-motivate the students or cause them to lose focus, as I'm accustomed to giving time limits and specific guidelines. However, although there were occasional small lapses in work output (a student might take a break from their work to walk around the room and look at the other hoops), no one completely lost focus, and every student completed their hoop construction. It is also possible that this relaxed timeline, which allowed for these small lapses in work output, contributed to a sense of community and wellbeing in the work environment. Students had a chance to visit their peers, compliment their work, and feel the excitement of accomplishing something as a group.

A couple of students were playing with hoops during the lesson, but Beany did not seem bothered. (Personal journal, 2019)

She is patient and allows experimentation and any questions. (Personal journal, 2019)

A couple of students who finished their first hoop quickly stood up and started to play with the hoops, spinning them on their hands and doing small throws in the air. Instinctually, I rose to my feet, ready to tell them to sit down and continue working. What if everyone started playing with their hoops? Is what they're doing disrespectful? I stopped myself and sat back down because I knew that the balance of power in the lesson was delicate, and if I started to insert myself unnecessarily as a disciplinarian, student focus might shift towards me and

away from Beany. So, I stayed nearby and watched. After about five minutes, the students in question sat down and continued working. Throughout the work period, several other students stood up and started to play as well and then sat down and continued to work. My fears of every student abandoning their work and chaos ensuing were not realized. Although this is an anecdote from the first lesson, Beany continued to allow experimentation throughout the process. When students strayed from the directions slightly to create variations on pictures or to practice a different skill with their hoop, they were left alone, and eventually came back to the group task. They were given some control in the direction of their learning and were also developing relationships with each other and with their hoops.

She emphasizes being strong and being connected to *your* hoop. (Personal journal, 2019)

During each step of the process, whether it was hoop making, learning how to pick up the hoop without using your hands, standing in a circle, raising the hoop to indicate readiness, honouring the four directions, or learning a new picture, strength and connection were emphasized. To me, this seemed to encourage the students to feel proud and competent. They were unique dancers taking responsibility for their contributions to the performance. Beany asked the students to hold up their hoops to show that they were ready and told them to hold them strong. Just saying the word “strong” changed the body language of the class. Children stood taller, held their hoops higher, and raised their eyes, looking powerful and centred in their learning.

She explained that unlike fables, which have a clear moral, Indigenous stories do not tell you what to think. You must figure it out for yourself. The hoops tell stories, but you don’t tell your audience what your pictures are beforehand. They must figure it out for themselves. (Personal journal, 2019)

As the hoop dance unit progressed and students had some time to enjoy the practical and kinesthetic aspects of learning, Beany began to make short statements to guide the students philosophically. She explained that the hoops tell stories but also introduced the complexity and nuance of these stories. She explained that to tell the audience the story of your dance does the audience a disservice, for when they reflect on the dance and when they interpret the dance in their own way, their own personal understandings will arise. Each picture tells a different story for different people, and the onus is on the audience to decipher the meaning for themselves.

She is supportive of students when they see other pictures” (Personal journal, 2019).

Similarly, Beany was supportive and encouraging of students who saw the pictures differently. If what is usually a butterfly was instead a fruit fly, that was okay! Although the pictures were predetermined by Beany, how those pictures were interpreted and expressed was open and free for each dancer. In Beany’s lessons there was a balance of structure,



expertise-based teaching, and freedom for students to explore and develop their own meanings, their own stories, their own power, and their own strength.

Although some of the students struggled to let go of the neoliberal, individualist approach to learning, other students understood the hoop dance project to be a group effort and a community learning project: "What surprised me was I didn't know that we were going to be that good at it... but we did pretty cool stuff..."

Another student made a powerful comment in the final reflection activity that expressed surprise that his opinion and voice were being considered in the planning and overall reflection on the project. He said,

I feel like this is the first time a teacher has asked us if we could tell them something they could change. I like how you chose just us, three out of everyone in the class who did it, I was really surprised how you chose us.

### **Humility**

I believe that humility is a particularly important teaching for non-Indigenous educators in our personal journeys of decolonization. I acknowledge the necessity of consistently examining my practices and actions to ensure that both research and pedagogy are conducted in ways that avoid potential issues and refrain from appropriating excessive space and power. Please note that the following discussion reflects my personal evolving understanding of humility and humility teachings, shaped by my readings and life experiences. I offer it with deep gratitude.

Of humility, Pamela Toulouse (2011) says the following:

In Anishinaabek teachings, humility refers to the individual's ability to know himself or herself as a sacred being (Benton-Banai 1988). Humility means knowing what one's strengths and challenges are and having the ability to ask for help when it is needed. Humility also refers to behaving (even with our words) in a way that is gentle and insightful. People with humility walk the talk always. (p. 42)

Upon reflection, I recognize that to know one's self requires awareness of not only knowledge, but of gaps in knowledge. Although professional development sessions at schools and faculties of education provide teachers with valuable introductions to Indigenous knowledge and decolonizing principals, embracing this knowledge with humility entails acknowledging that the path from awareness to wisdom is lengthy and reaching the destination may ultimately be an elusive endeavor. Cultural humility, as coined by medical doctors Melanie Tervalon and Jann Murray-Garcia (1998), is a useful tool to conceptualize the movement from the rigidity and comfort of knowing to the flexibility and potential discomfort of not knowing and humility. They explain that cultural humility emphasizes learning as a journey rather than expertise as a destination. It recognizes the validity of multiple perspectives and the significant impacts of power dynamics (1998). Joy Agner

(2020) supports the need for a paradigm shift from cultural competence to cultural humility in the field of occupational therapy. She discusses practical strategies for implementing cultural humility, which include engaging in self-assessment and self-awareness exercises, seeking ongoing education, actively listening to clients' stories, and collaborating with patients as equal partners. I suspect that cultural humility has as much to offer the education discipline as it does health care. I also observed that the self-reflective strategies suggested by Agner may help develop a greater appreciation of one's own strengths and challenges, thus honouring the Anishinaabek understanding of humility (Toulouse, 2011).

During my collaboration with Beany John, I identified power sharing as a personal and classroom challenge and I reflected upon power, individuality versus collective achievement, and the politics of claiming space. I argue that humility constitutes a shift in focus from the individual to the group, from speaking to listening, and from knowing to learning. In my opinion, Beany John's teaching exemplified humility and acted as a countermeasure against individualism in our classroom.

### **Personal Narrative and the "Humility Pendulum"**

In consideration of critical pedagogy, and in honest reflection, I struggled with humility and power sharing throughout the project. I found it useful to imagine the quality of humility as a pendulum, which oscillates between two extremes. One extreme is the "insecure zone," which is a state of anxiety and concern that one is not worthy of their position and that their skills, knowledge, and abilities are not sufficient to the task. At the other extreme of the "humility pendulum" is a state of uninformed confidence and perhaps arrogance. This is a place of ignorance and entitled confidence in one's own skill. At this end, the individual doubts the abilities of others and feels justified in imposing their own wills and opinions, not seeing the value of multiple perspectives. At the center of the pendulum lies the humble state, which is characterized by an awareness of one's own strengths and life experiences, a self-identification as learner, and a deep respect for other ways of knowing. In this middle place, the person feels confident enough to offer their ideas to the world, while at the same time understanding that their knowledge is not superior to the knowledge of others. They are attuned to the changing power dynamics of each situation and wish to support, learn from, and build good relationships with the people that they meet along their journey. However, even in this place of humility there is some discomfort, as the pendulum always wants to swing.

I was only infrequently able to achieve the state of calm and comfort that is this "middle way." My own feelings of concern and anxiety drew me to the insecure side of the profile, but my paired and opposite feelings of frustration would take me to the other extreme. For example, I sometimes felt insecure about my abilities and qualifications to plan and facilitate part of the hoop dance project. In one of my first journal entries, I wrote:

I worry that I don't know what I'm doing... I tend to feel nervous as sessions start.  
(Personal journal, 2019)

The nerves in this project were different than typical teaching excitement and stemmed not only from the novelty and uniqueness of the project, but also from the distinct feeling that I was now entering an uncomfortable place where decolonizing intentions are threatened by potentially pervasive and internalized colonial constructs. I could see that the students and staff were excited and proud and that my principal felt that hiring an Indigenous expert enhanced our school programming. The Indigenous and non-Indigenous families in the school were aware of what we were doing and were supportive, which indicated a significant degree of trust, considering that this was unlike anything the school had done before. Also, Beany, whom I perceived as having “celebrity” status for her very impressive technical skills and her vast traditional knowledge, was a guest at my school and I was quite concerned about her having a positive experience.

Beany’s experience, as well as those of the students, the teachers, the principal, and the parents rested on my ability to organize and effectively facilitate this project, and this made me nervous. Even with Beany’s expertise as primary instructor, I knew that my decisions would be fundamentally impactful. I was the one who planned the number of sessions, the structure of the sessions (i.e., location, duration), the letters home, the parent communication, the interactions with the students about the project when Beany wasn’t there, the fielding of questions to administration, the reflection discussions and activities, and the structure and overall content of the final performance. However, this is a project of Indigenous knowledge, and I am not an Indigenous person. Further to this, I have received a colonized education throughout my life and work within the systems of colonization that are alive and well in Canada. I make ongoing efforts to educate myself in Indigenous history, the colonization of education in Canada, and Indigenous arts, however, this learning has been done through the eyes and experiences of a white woman. Even with ongoing reflection and earnest efforts, how could I be so bold as to plan, teach, or facilitate Indigenous content in a school? Additionally, there was the very significant fact that my school has a population of Indigenous children who may have cultural experiences and knowledges that far exceed my own. Thus, I moved forward carefully and critically.

Paradoxically, and as the pendulum swung, there were moments when I wanted more control. As Beany was teaching, I felt confident and secure in her knowledge competency, but I was occasionally concerned about the delivery. I understood that a classroom of intermediate age students can quickly become chaotic and that respectful student attitudes can sometimes only evolve as a product of organized management systems including clearly outlining rules before a lesson begins, waiting for everyone to be quiet before speaking, using a clear voice that projects, giving specific timelines and expectations for each activity, and varying activities to maintain student attention. Throughout the lessons, I was worried that because Beany’s style is different than mine, her management strategies might not be sufficient to regulate the class. I wanted more control, but I accepted these feelings without acting on them.

Although I am embarrassed to admit it here, throughout the hoop dance project I was also occasionally affected by a lack of trust, which I believe may be rooted in problematic feelings of knowledge superiority. Of course, these feelings were unfounded, and I share them here

as an attempt to honestly reflect upon this project and the challenges therein. Why do I sometimes experience a lack of trust, a desire to control, and a belief that my approach is preferable? Is the answer, yet again, the invasive tendrils of colonialism? I suspect that sadly, and shamefully, this is the case. A journal entry reveals several other factors, that, although somewhat less systemic, are factors nonetheless.

It took me a while to sit down and write this week. My attention is split and my enthusiasm for the project is waning. I don't feel *negatively* towards it. I just have other things on my mind. For example: the language club had a field trip on Tuesday, the theatre class had their final performance on Tuesday night, I had my final Anishinaabemowin test on Wednesday night, the grade fives picked their instruments for next year, which makes it tricky because there's twenty eight of them this year and only fourteen grade 8s, and my mind keeps thinking about my Easter weekend climbing trip to the University of Toronto Outings Club cabin which I'm organizing and which is a bit of effort. Also, I'm sick. I've been sick for over a week. I took Monday off. Tuesday was 8am to 9pm and it wrecked me, so I took Wednesday off. I went in on Thursday which ruined my voice. I went in on Friday but had basically no voice, and I continue to have no voice. Laryngitis? Ok, now to the hoop project! (Personal journal, 2019)

This journal entry illustrates typical teacher stressors related to a busy job and a variety of life activities, but the result edged towards problematic ideology. When I feel stress, do my "educated" and "evolved" ideas around decolonizing education dissolve to reveal underlying colonial belief systems of western cultural superiority? This is a dramatic and disturbing question which points towards the long and necessary process of self-decolonization.

### **Student Narratives**

I was not the only one who struggled with power dynamics in the classroom during the hoop dance project. For example, although Beany asked students to make three identical hoops, several students pushed back: "I see everyone's are the same, I want mine to have a different vibe."

Although subtle, I believe this indicates a desire to receive personal recognition beyond the group. It is difficult to know how conscious this attempt was and how much the desire to make a different hoop was defiant in nature. For example, in our art projects and story projects at school, students are often encouraged to create something that is unique. The expression of uniqueness is seen as a healthy expression of the self. However, viewed through a different lens, the demonstration of individuality as a positive manifestation of oneself may be potentially mirroring a Western colonial perspective where the emphasis on the individual is paramount, as opposed to the community. However, in this case, students were specifically instructed to make their hoops as a set that would match, so I found it interesting to see that there was resistance. Were they so accustomed to expressing their individuality that they thought that of course this would be an appropriate thing to do? Or were they knowingly testing the boundaries of the teacher or the project? Were they seeking outside validation for creating something that was different and better, despite what was

requested? Beany responded by gently persisting in her teaching approach, and maintaining a positive emphasis on the essential objectives of the class.

Regarding the physical hoop movements, several students wanted to share their personal accomplishments. While this can be interpreted as healthy pride, it can also indicate a desire for individual praise, and the recognition that they had been able to do something that others had not: "I was really good at it."

In the following example, one student seemed impressed with a demonstration that Beany gave, in which she skipped with the hoop. This is very difficult because the hoop is only the width of the arm, so for an adult sized body to skip through it requires precise movement and great flexibility. Beany also skipped quite quickly, and the class was noticeably impressed. The student asks this question during a reflection session where Beany was not present: "Do you know how she learned how to do the skipping? Cause that would be really hard." Before anyone could answer, another student calls out, "I can do the skipping."

I found it interesting that while one student is expressing humble admiration coupled with curiosity, another is mostly interested in letting the other students know that they can do this difficult thing and thus take some of the power and admiration away from the instructor.

Similarly, students would sometimes share what they had learned, and other students would attempt to share in the accomplishment: "But now I can throw it up into the air and catch it." "Yah, I can do that too."

During the practices and the performance, students performed in lines, and some students were concerned with where they would stand. Some wished to be in the back, whether through insecurity, for their own comfort, to be further from the watchful eyes of the instructor, or for another unknown reason. Other students consistently wanted to be in the front, so that they could be closer to instruction, so they could see better, for another reason, or possibly so that they could be most visible and receive the most attention. Beany regularly rotated the positioning of the students. "Me and Shawn forgot to ask if we could be front..."

Beany guided the students through the formation of "pictures," which involved arranging hoops and bodies into positions to tell the story of the dance. One student wanted to acknowledge who could create the pictures most quickly, even though speed wasn't a focal point of Beany's instruction: "Me and Derrick were faster than other people. Oh, and Carter was fast too."

Of course, many students did not indicate a desire for personal recognition and praise in their reflections or classroom contributions, however there were enough examples indicating a desire for individual recognition to illustrate a theme that was present throughout the project.

I suspect that the desire for control that I felt and the desire for recognition that some students displayed were characteristics of western and neoliberal influence. The neoliberal

focus on free trade, minimal regulation, and increase in the private sector has potentially created a society that values individual achievement above community well-being and humility in learning. More specifically, in sociologist Loic Wacquant's (2009) book, *Punishing the Poor: The Neoliberal Government of Social Insecurity*, the author posits that the western neoliberal state has become a "centaur state," in which there is little government control in the top economic bracket of society, and strict control on the bottom. Under a guise of free trade capitalism and "hard work equals big gains" rhetoric, instead, we have a system that gives free reign to "the 1%," and heavy regulation of the lower class, which, as a result, grows and struggles and has difficulty finding value and voice. Conversely, those who have struggled to achieve some capital success look at this lower class with derision, stating that if they had more personal merit, they would work harder, and secure their own success (Wacquant, 2009). I suspect that this neoliberal, centaur state has "trickled down" into the classroom where students who are heavily regulated at home, at school, and within the above mentioned system, seek personal success and recognition to become leaders in their own peer circles, to secure what power they can in their classrooms, and to eventually rise up within adult society to escape regulation and become leaders in the private sector of a neoliberal world. Becoming the most accomplished student in the class in any activity, be it soccer, math, or hoop dancing, is practice for the same type of individual recognition outside of school which will be required to "succeed" in our current system. Though students may be told by their teachers to value community, think of their classmates, and embrace humility, these words are weak in comparison to the strong pull of the systems in which we live and the message that they receive throughout their lives that they must run faster, work harder, achieve more, and make sure that everyone around them knows it.

## CONCLUSION

Drawing on my collaboration with Beany John and my subsequent reflections on humility, I have developed three personal insights which have enriched my professional practice. These insights may hold value for educators and administrators, especially those hoping to engage with Indigenous artists and knowledge with respect and humility. First, I feel that undertaking a project that utilizes Indigenous knowledge as a focal point, devoid of an Indigenous collaborator as an equal partner, is an endeavor that is unfeasible and unwise. I simply could not have done it on my own. As I witnessed the nuance and depth of Beany's knowledge, it was clear that without a lifetime of lived experience, I could not lead a hoop dance unit in a good way and an attempt to do so would recreate colonial ideas and cause harm. However, I also recognize that while there are many classrooms and non-Indigenous teachers who wish to begin the work of decolonizing and Indigenizing curricula, it is not always possible to collaborate with Indigenous artists. My intentions to address these concerns are as follows: I will work to elevate the status of Indigenous knowledge and uphold the work of Indigenous scholars (Kovach, 2009). I will consider who is "doing the work" when inviting Indigenous experts into my class and ensure that I can offer appropriate monetary compensation for their time. In addition, and especially if funding is not available for a speaker or artist, I will prioritize attending events, viewing media resources, and reading Indigenous authors with my classes.

Second, I recognize that relationship and respect are crucial, between instructors, students, and the content itself. Beany modelled relationships in her teaching and the students responded in lovely ways. For example, in one reflection activity, a student wrote, “They aren’t hula hoops. They are our friends.” Throughout the unit, I did not witness students acting in a disrespectful way towards Beany or towards their hoops at any point. Similarly, Beany taught the students with a gentle authority, allowing questions and discussion and emphasizing teamwork. She also required students to wait for each other and work as a group, but at the same time told them that they were on an individual journey, and that their dance was their own. As a result, relationships were strengthened, and students gave a full and joyful effort. In my future practice I will allow relationship to inform my planning, and I will recognize the importance of relationship building as central to the learning process.

Finally, although I fear that my presence is unwanted, that my presence may perpetuate colonial thought, and that I have no right to space in this conversation, I have learned that through cultural humility and ongoing critical reflection, I can contribute to the reconciliation project. In fact, as a treaty person and a recipient of the benefits of Treaty 20 and the Williams Treaty, it is my *responsibility* to do what I can to further reconciliation and decolonization and use my own privilege to make space for Indigenous knowledge and knowledge holders in the school system (Switzer, 2020). The final report of the Truth and Reconciliation states, “To the Commission, ‘reconciliation’ is about establishing and maintaining a mutually respectful relationship between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal peoples in this country. For that to happen, there has to be awareness of the past, acknowledgement of the harm that has been inflicted, atonement for the causes, and action to change behaviour” (TRC, 2015, Vol. 6, p. 3). I feel animated by these four recommendations and see paths therein. I believe that I can help students become aware of the past and the harms that have been inflicted. I also believe that I can enact action to change my own behaviours and perhaps inspire such changes in my students as well. However, I must continually adopt a position of humility that not only places power sharing at its centre, but also abandons the paternalistic motivations of “giving,” “allowing,” and “recognizing,” in favour of a new way of moving forward in equity and shared learning.

Was the hoop dance collaboration successful in constructing an environment that cultivates a humble space? I propose that the hoop dance project served as a modest yet meaningful step towards modelling a collaborative teaching space grounded in humility. Beany John’s teaching exemplified humility and deep knowledge and challenged the entrenched colonial norms within our classroom, thereby creating an atmosphere conducive to genuine understanding and collaboration. ■

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