

How to Teach Hard Topics Through Arts Based Practices:
The Native Youth Program and Indian Residential School As a Case Study.

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In the classroom how do we as museum and art educators teach difficult and complicated issues? How can we, through the use of the arts, help students not only understand difficult issues but help them to internalize them and come out with their own thoughts and opinions? In this article I highlight the pedagogical implementations of using Indigenous artists, traditional arts projects, current literature and digital media to create a space for learning and discussion to flourish. I present a case study based on a year of working with the Native Youth Program (NYP) that is run by The Museum of Anthropology (MOA) at the University of British Columbia (UBC) campus in Vancouver, British Columbia, Canada. As the program coordinator and curriculum designer, I led this special program for eight months with four First Nation youth from 2013 to 2014 focusing primarily on the issue of Indian residential schools in Canada. Through the practical implementation of Indigenous teaching methods, I intend to provide insight into guiding museum and art educators who want to teach hard topics to young people.

The NYP is a youth summer program that has been working with youth since 1979. It invites urban Aboriginal (Metis, Inuit and First Nations, status and non-status) youth from lower mainland Vancouver between the ages of 15-18 to utilize museum resources and collections to connect with and explore their personal identity. In recent years there has been a push towards digital-mediated arts based projects, like short film and digital zine making, while still making space for traditional knowledge like cedar bark weaving and drum making. One of the primary goals of the NYP has always been knowledge dissemination to the general public through the use of museum tours given by the NYP students. During the months of July and August, they are trained to give public tours while learning through museum collections. Unlike typical museum tours, the NYP tours are geared towards the students speaking about what they are learning regarding their own identity as First Nation youth and how that can be represented through objects in the museum.

2014 was the year of Reconciliation in Vancouver, British Columbia. It marked and hopefully helped to heal some of the wounds caused by the Indian residential school system in Canada. In 2014, MOA presented an exhibition titled *Speaking to Memory: Images and Voices from St. Michael's Residential School*. Combined, both events provided the perfect opportunity for the NYP to reach out to museum visitors and teach them about the issues surrounding Indian residential school. As an Aboriginal educator involved with the NYP for several years, I saw this as an opportunity to design a curriculum around an issue that is rarely focused on.

Indian residential schools¹ in Canada operated from the 1830s to the 1990s, the last school closing in 1996. As one of the NYP students stated on her tour, "To give you some context, the last residential school closed the year I was born, 18 years ago." (Mary,

personal communication, Oct 28, 2014) Indian residential schools took children away from their families, their communities, and their cultures. Indian Residential schools shaved and cut children's hair, let them only speak English, gave them little to no education, and often times inflicted emotional, physical, and sexual abuse. In 1920, Duncan Campbell Scott, Deputy Superintendent-General of the Department of Indian Affairs of Canada, explicitly stated that the national residential school system's policy depended on forced assimilation to meet his ultimate objective:

I want to get rid of the Indian problem... Our object is to continue until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic and there is no Indian question, and no Indian Department.
(Chrisjohn & Young, 1997, p. 42)

The Aboriginal youth I worked with, myself included, are known as intergenerational survivors.

Intergenerational Survivor refers to any individual who has been affected by the intergenerational dysfunction created by the experience of attending residential school. Intergenerational Survivors have been indirectly affected by residential schools because they were raised by people who had been severely abused – physically and emotionally – and these people were, at times, unable to parent their own children. In fact, the lack of parenting skills is one of the most profound outcomes of the residential school system. (Legacy of Hope, Where are the Children Exhibition, retrieved from wherearethechildren.ca. July 30 2014.)

As intergenerational survivors I knew that what we would be talking about would be wrought with emotion and that it would be necessary to leave plenty of time for discussion. One of the exercises that I had us do was journal reflections. In them, one of the students remarked

I'm scared to have kids. I don't want to say that I have bad parents because I don't, but a lot of abuse has been passed down since my family was in residential school and I am scared to death I will pass on that abuse. (Mary, personal communication, Nov 21 2013)

These are the realities of the students that I work with and they are an important part of the journey that we took together.

Teaching Difficult Topics

Indian residential school and topics like it are often difficult to teach but are at the same time necessary to learn and to understand. How then do we go about teaching topics like this in a way that helps students to explore, realize and define their own experiences with such topics? In secondary school curricula, topics such as Indian residential school are often given the space of one page in textbooks, and teachers often breeze over the paragraphs giving only broad generalities. As a student reflected,

I basically learned nothing in school about residential school, except for the fact that there was residential school and that children were taken away and it was run by the government and churches. That's basically it. That's what I learned throughout the entirety of high school. It was something like one paragraph in the textbook and meant nothing. (Mary, personal communication, April 12 2014)

The activities that I used throughout the program that were the most beneficial were talking to actual survivors of residential school, free writing in our journals, going to exhibitions and watching performances, connecting with community events, watching films and documentaries, reading literature like graphic novels, doing a traditional art project and lots of discussionⁱⁱ. The students had varying levels of reactions to the activities but the one that they universally responded to was listening to actual survivors. "The most helpful learning experiences that made me feel comfortable talking about this subject were first hand testimonies from people; they gave a nuanced view that you can't get from a documentary or a textbook." (Sarah, personal interview, May 5 2014) When I asked students at the end of the program if they were going to design their own curricula for other students what would they include and what would they take away, they all suggested more time spent with survivors talking about their stories. They didn't want to take anything away because they felt all of the components really helped in their own ways but when we talked to survivors they all felt the weight of what we were learning.

By using broad statements such as "Indian residential school was bad," or "It hurt a lot of people," you are giving no solid referential base for students. It is hard for them to connect with and internalize such broad statements. In order for them to understand and connect with what Indian residential schools were like, you have to be as specific as possible and relate it to their own experiences. For example, something that I hear over and over again is the children who were taken to residential school were forced to speak English. But what does that actually mean? Until you can get a student to realize the important influence that language has on how a person thinks, feels, and exists in the world, it is a generalization that they cannot relate to. One of the NYP students is a speaker of his traditional language. It was through a breakthrough moment with him that the rest of the students were able to realize the importance of language for a community. I can still remember him sitting in the classroom, giving us translations from English to his language, and the frustration he was feeling with trying to find the translation of my name, which means free, to his language. He described my name as the moment you come to a valley from a cliff and see the expanse of land in front of you. He had this look of concentration on his face before he stood up and exclaimed,

Wait, if I wasn't able to speak my language, then I wouldn't think like this anymore and I wouldn't be my nation anymore. If I did my ceremonies in English they wouldn't mean anything because it wouldn't be the same. Whoa, so these kids, they lost all of that? (Peter, personal communication, February 15 2014)

After that moment we were able to sit in discussion and really talk about what the loss of language means. It wasn't a discussion I had planned but I found that throughout the

program the students started to make these spontaneous connections to the Indian residential school experience and their own lives.

Indigenous Teaching Methods

When looking at Indigenous teaching methods, oral storytelling and performance are two strategies that I often use in the classroom. They are techniques imparting knowledge in a way that gives the listener something to hold on to that can be more than words on a page. One of the great things about running the NYP during the winter of 2014 was the number of Truth and Reconciliation events that were taking place in Vancouver at the time. One of the events that had a deep impact on the NYP students was an exhibition from The Morris and Helen Belkin Art Gallery at UBC titled *Witnesses: Art and Canada's Indian Residential Schools*.

The part of the exhibition that impacted the students the most was the performance of "This is not a simple movement" by Peter Morin, a Tahltan First Nations artist, curator, and writer. During the performance there was palpable emotion in the air. Morin was honoring the children that had gone through the Indian residential school process; we in the audience could feel the fear, the hurt, and the extreme loss that the children had experienced. It was a performance and ceremony we were honored to witness. Morin reflected in an interview on his inspiration:

I made a button blanket covered in human hair. I invited the audience members to step up and come along on a journey with me and confront the difficult political histories we live in as members of what we call Canada. I invited them to cut the blanket off my body while I was wearing it...For all the children who were murdered or starved to death or died of disease. I feel like they also want to dance. I feel like they also want to play a drum. I feel like they also want to have a mask...What do we do after the residential school? We pick up the pieces and sew them together and try to make music together. It's still collectively working together to express grief or transform grief or transform the future. (Vancouver Sun, November 19 2013, an interview with Peter Morin)

The NYP students responded strongly to a part in the performance in which Morin expressed something they had been struggling to express throughout our time in the program thus far. As intergenerational survivors there are parts of our culture, our history that we as a group felt cut off from. With the exception of one, none of us spoke our native language, we weren't very versed in cultural ceremonies, and often times felt that missing void. While asking how we honor these children without knowing what to do, a student responded,

There was a speaker that came to UBC (Peter Morin) and he did a ceremony for those that passed away at residential school and he talked about how he has to learn about his traditions, ceremonies and songs from tape recordings because there are no elders to teach him anymore. I could totally relate to that. (Tim, personal communication, March 24 2014)

This feeling of something being lost and being disconnected is one I have encountered working with Indigenous youth constantly.

I decided that we had to have a project that used our hands, something that would take us a while to complete, and would give us time to talk while we worked. So we started to make medicine bundles. Growing up my grandmother would always be sitting at her table in the kitchen working on her beadwork. There was never a night when you couldn't find her up past midnight surrounded by a tottering pile of hides with her beads spread out on towels, reflecting the light from the overhead lamp. She would sit with the radio on and she would be in peace. It was a form of meditation; a time when she could relax her mind, having nine kids demanded this of you, and she could think and reflect. After all the films, exhibitions, books, guest speakers and events, I knew that was exactly what we needed, time to reflect. I was in part inspired by the words we heard from Peter Morin as he talked about burning the masks and button blankets so the children who had died in residential school could dance again in the afterlife, how he said we should honor them as much as possible. I thought that we could fill our bundles with good medicine that would honor our own journey, but also leave space for honoring these children who had taught us so much. This time allowed us to either sit in silence, or when I felt like we needed to talk, I would ask questions about what we had learned that day. When your hands are moving and your eyes are focused on something in front of you, it is really easy to speak without self-consciousness, and during these periods some of our richest discussions took place.

Throughout the eight months I noticed a marked difference in the NYP students. They came into the program uncomfortable and ashamed at their lack of knowledge regarding Indian residential school and other aspects of their own history. Every single one of us, myself included, had many members of our own families in residential school but still the lack of information was stopping us from openly speaking about it. It is something that has directly impacted our lives and for so long we weren't able to speak about it with anyone. One of the students, Mary, stated in an interview near the end of the program,

The NYP 2014 winter program helped me realize how residential school affects my life. Before I came to the program I felt a lot more removed from residential school. Basically what I thought about residential school was that my grandpa and grandma went to it and that's it. For me then that was the extent of its effect on my family; I didn't realize how it affected through generations. During this process I was able to talk more freely at home, and I learned that my auntie who had been in a residential school had had those nutritional experiments done on her that were in the news recently. This experience in the program has just really changed my view about how close the issue of residential schools actually affects my family. All the dysfunctions in my family, I thought they were there just because, but now I realize they are connected to residential school and are intergenerational effects. (Mary, personal communication, May 5 2014)

One of the other learning outcomes that took place for the students through this process was a feeling of ownership over their knowledge. They now felt comfortable in sharing

with the public what they had learned. For the last month of the program we gave public tours on Indian residential school in the museum. We used the exhibition, *Speaking to Memory*, as a launching point and often found ourselves in hour long discussions with museum guests many of whom had never even heard of Indian residential school. “I think if not for all the stuff we've been doing in the winter NYP I wouldn't feel comfortable going in front of people and trying to educate them about residential school, “ (Sarah, personal communication, March 24, 2014) This empowering process was a sentiment that most of the students expressed as they felt like now they were allowed to speak about Indian residential school whereas before they felt like they had to hide from conversations because they lacked the knowledge. Now they actively engaged in conversation outside of the museum.

Teaching Ideas

At the beginning of this article I asked two important questions about how we approach teaching difficult topics and how we get the students to a point where they can internalize such topics and arrive at their own thoughts and opinions. When it comes to approaching the teaching of these topics I feel that it is very important to do so with a goal in mind: What do you want your students to be able to do at the end of this process? Is it to have them talk openly about how they feel about topics like this? Is it for them to be able to create responsive artwork? Or is it to have them present their knowledge to others? It is important to ask them what they want to get out of the process at the beginning and ask them again what they feel they learned at the end to see what has changed. Another important approach that I used, and one that I feel made this curriculum work, was an extended time period. Throughout this eight-month process I realized the importance of giving this type of topic the space it demands. I worked with the students for five hours every two to three weeks. Sometimes all we would do in an afternoon was watch a film or documentary and then work on our beading. Other times we would head to an exhibition and have our boundaries pushed, giving the students the space to absorb and continually build on the knowledge that came before we were ready to tackle a subject that is heavy with emotion and history. If I had tried to push everything into a day it would have been too much; the emotionality of it would distance the students. You need space, you need a place that is comfortable for honest discussion, a place where a person can have a “whoa” moment. I was lucky in that I only had four students and was able to foster a deep sense of community among us but I feel that with a group of 12-15 you would still be able to do that, given enough time.

In terms of the practical aspects of the curriculum and pedagogy, I would say keeping a journal and having many honest and open discussions throughout with questions prepared is also important. Additionally, our doing a project that utilized the hands, bringing in survivors or people who have first hand knowledge of the events in history, and using great literary and media resources like literature and films that are already available are all essential to the success of your program.

Conclusion

The necessity of teaching topics like this cannot be stated enough; right now they are not being taught by enough people and what I hear from my students is that they are craving the space in which to really explore and learn, a place where they can be supported. Hard topics are a part of our history and they affect our present history. Through the use of artists, and in this case performance art from an Indigenous perspective, hands-on projects that give students something to take away as a reminder of their learning, it is possible to change a way a person thinks, feels, and interacts with a topic like Indian residential school. The practical implementation of Indigenous teaching methods like oral storytelling, the passing on of knowledge, and the holding on to cultural memories are Indigenous ways that can be applied to more topics than just Indian residential school.

¹ For more information on Indian Residential Schools please visit: irsss.ca

² **Additional recommended resources:** *7 generations a 4-book Graphic Novel Series* by David Alexander Robertson, illustrated by Scott B. Henderson For Grades 9–12. High Water Press. 2010. *7 Generations Teachers Guide*. <https://highwaterpress.com/shop-2/7-generations-series/>. High Water Press. 2010. *500 years of resistance* by Gord Hill. Arsenal Pulp Press. 2010. *Red power* by Brian Wright-McLeod. Fifth House Publishers. 2011. *Brandon Mitchell, writer; Tara Audibert, illustrator*. Healthy Aboriginal Network. 2013. *Sugar Falls: a residential school story* by David Alexander Robertson, Scott B Henderson. High Water Press. 2012 *UNeducation, Vol 1: A Residential School Graphic Novel* by Jason Eaglespeaker. 2011. *My Name is Seepeetza* by Shirly Steerling. Groundwood Books. 1992. *Fatty legs : a true story* by Christy Jordan-Fenton & Margaret Pokiak-Fenton ; artwork by Liz Amini-Holmes. Annick Press. 2010. *A is for assimilation* by Len Fortune. Nigwakwe Learning Press. 2010. *Shin-chi's canoe* by Nicola I. Campbell author, Kin Lafave illustrator. Groundwood Books. 2008. *We Were Children* Directed by Tim Wolochatiuk and written by Jason Sherman. 2012. *Savage* by Lisa Jackson. 2009.

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* Due to the personal nature of the discussions and journal entries, of the Native Youth Program 2014 winter participants, identities have been removed.

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Francine has been working with Aboriginal youth for over 8 years and has been working with the Native Youth Program at The Museum of Anthropology since 2009. During her time with the Native Youth Program, Francine, has facilitated projects such as *Who I (really) am* a short film series, *A piece of me* a visual art book, *A place to call home* a poetry and photography book, *Mixed Tribes* a print and digital zine, and many others.

Francine is currently running creative writing and visual art workshops in lower mainland Vancouver with the aim of helping students express their unique expressions surrounding issues of identity. She is also working on her first novel.

If you would like to contact Francine about running creative writing or visual art workshops please visit francinecunningham.ca
