

A Deeper Understanding of Cultural Safety, Colonising and Seating in a Teacher Education Program: A Preliminary Study

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This preliminary study considers the implications of where students of Aboriginal descent sat in a teacher education classroom, its significance in relation to the space of the classroom, the importance of the place to the individual and its links to creating a climate of cultural safety in the classroom. Six students from two cohorts of varying sizes were interviewed as to why they sat where they did in the classroom and why the place where they sat remained relatively stable. The study uses quotations from the students and reflectively seeks to understand their experience in the class. Risking themselves in a university context which itself is the product of the very colonisers who created the conditions for cultural genocide through residential schools. It is tentatively concluded that where First People sit in the classroom maybe reflective of the territory to which they belong.

■ **Keywords:** teacher education, postsecondary classroom, territory place, First Nations, cultural safety

Setting

Canada's northwest coastal region is dominated by First Nation people. Tsimshian, Nisga'a, Haisla, Haida and Gitks'an people are very active and outspoken about their culture. Varyingly Aboriginal people make up 40–95% of the towns and villages in the region. While the centres are dominated by Eurasian people they are increasingly being pushed into the background. It is in this settling that the University of Northern British Columbia has a small regional campus at Terrace which hosts a teacher training program. This two-year teacher education program is now in its ninth year of operation. During its 9 years, 35% of the teacher candidates have come from an Aboriginal background.

First Nation territory in the Northwest region is very important to the people both in a physical and spiritual-cultural sense. It should be mentioned that much of British Columbia, unlike the rest of Canada, does not have treaties to define, in a western European sense, the land base of the people. While there are reserves, these reserves are situated around lands which have become indeterminate. That is to say that smaller reserves are surrounded by lands that have traditionally been claimed, and never ceded, by the people (Sterritt, Marsden, Galois, Grant, & Overstall, 1998). Indeed the first modern treaty in British Columbia

was signed by the Nisga'a people on May 11, 2000. This gave the Nisga'a people control nearly 2000 square kilometres of land. The remainder of the land area, with the exception of Southern Vancouver Island and the north-east of the Province, is subject to ongoing treaty negotiations with the various Aboriginal peoples that inhabit them.

First Nation identity is established through cultural practices which are bound up with the physical landscape. The whole meaning of place, in its fullest sense, emerges through the intertwining of the land and the culture. (Schouls, 2003) This indicates that knowing the land has a different meaning for First Nations people as than for Europeans. This difference is perhaps caught in the Tsimshian term used for Euroasian visitors to their territory: *adabiis*. (*Adabiis* is a dialect way of saying butterfly [Lax Kwalaams uses *Adabiis*], while the community of Hartley Bay uses *Baxbogmgymk*.) The visitors are given the term as a temporary clan through which they may

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join whatever formal event it is that they are attending. An adabiis is a butterfly, an insect who flits from place to place. But more importantly, for our purposes, their movement does not suggest a strong attachment to any one place or territory: the butterfly is always on the move from one flower to the next. Aboriginal people do not easily move emotionally from place to place: their home is always the home of their people, the land where they come from. Audrey Woods, a culturally confident and knowledgeable Gitkx'an woman, once described the difference like this: 'the Skeena River only begins when it enters Gitkx'an territory and ends when it leaves the territory'. While she knows the river has a source and a mouth, both far from Gitkx'an territory, the section that flows through it is what embraces their language culture (removing the 'and' indicates that culture cannot be separated from language), values and land. This section of the river cannot be mixed with other sections of the Skeena nor with other rivers in other places. The sense of place, of home territory, is very strong within the peoples of British Columbia's Pacific Northwest coast.

The Aboriginal students in the teacher training program have, for the most part, come to the program from the surrounding territories. Nisga'a and Tsimshian people comprise the largest number of students. 'Cultural safety' is one of the dominant themes around which Faculty have organised the program. Within the program, it is defined as

The effective teaching of a person/ family from another culture by a teacher who has undertaken a process of reflection on his / her own cultural identity and recognizes the impact of the teacher's culture on his / her own classroom practice. [Adapted from Nursing Council of New Zealand (NCNZ), 2011, p.7]

Unsafe cultural practice is any action that diminishes, demeans or disempowers the cultural identity and well being of an individual or group. [National Aboriginal Health Organization (NAHO), 2006, p.3]

One of the focuses of the program is to integrate First Nations values and knowledge into the courses that are offered. In some cases, this is openly done: for example understanding the impact of the residential schooling on First Nation children today. At other times, the relation is subtle: the program is opened, for example, on the banks of the Kalum River in the village of Kitsumkalum. In times past, this area was teeming with First People and later European traders as they moved up and down the Skeena River. For most students standing on the banks of the Kalum River is like visiting a 'foreign' place. It is invisible until one actually stands in that place and feels the bank under them. This connection to the land at the beginning of the program becomes a powerful beacon for the rest of the course that at first is not recognised by many of the students. Underneath it all is the beginning of an unfolding of a culturally safe space within the program for all of the

students. It is within this context that the preliminary research for this paper was begun.

Method

Teachers look at the classrooms time and time again. What do they see? Students arranged in various configurations: some at the front, some at the back and some in between. There is distance, in real terms, between the instructor and the students occupying the physical space of the classroom. Teachers intuitively know that space: it is always before them. (Sinha & Beyzzheva, 2012; Totusek & Station-Spicer, 1982; Tupper, Carson, Johnson & Mangat, 2008) But Massey, a western philosopher who is interested in the concept of social space, says of this space:

One of the recurring motifs in what follows is just how little, actually, space is thought about explicitly. Nonetheless, the persistent associations leave a residue of effects. We develop ways of incorporating a spatiality into our ways of being in the world, modes of coping with the challenge that the enormous reality of space throws up. (Massey, 2005, p. 8)

Massey suggests that teachers not only have learned to overtly ignore the classroom space which stretches before them but more importantly suggests there are residues of the spatial aspects of the classroom that remain after the class ends. Two questions emerge: What are these residues and how important are they to the lives of the students? Instructors are also faced with the place of the classroom: its situatedness. Besides the physical location of the class there is also the relational positioning of the teacher and the students. Malpas calls attention to this when he writes: 'If the relation to place is an essential one, then it is not a relation that we can ever leave without leaving our very humanity' (Malpas, 2012, p. 63.). Like Massey, Malpas also calls our attention to the residue of place: those moments that linger and touch the core of our being. But what lingers and what touches the core of our being? Part of the answer may lie in the composition of the class and the way in which they locate themselves in the classroom and how they relate to others in the group both culturally and educationally. Taken together the influences of space and place in the classroom are very powerful. Their power may extend far beyond the borders of a classroom into time and culture.

This preliminary study took place over 4 years and involved two cohorts. In cohort one four Aboriginal students were interviewed three times during their two-year program. In cohort two, which was a smaller group, Aboriginal students were interviewed two times. This group served as a reference group. In both groups, the initial question each student was asked was as follows: Why did you sit where you did in the classroom? Additional questions were asked to clarify individual meaning or to expand upon it. Interviews were conducted prior to the end of each semester. Subsequent interviews asked if anything about where they were sitting changed since the last interview.

Responses to the questions were recorded and considered in relation to issues related to space and place in the classroom. The interviews are reflections of the reality of being in a culturally mixed classroom and as such consider the interconnected events that impact the students' perceptions of where they sit in the classroom. Interviews were considered in terms of the social relationships which the interviewees perceived in terms of their experiences.

Reflection 1

This first reflection considers the First Peoples who were members of an education cohort on the Northwest Campus of the University of Northern British Columbia. The cohort was composed of about 30 students while First People's members comprised 15. A number (6) of these students had previously been together in another community in a language culture program. This reflection will focus on four of those students.

A) Early days.

We sat in the back row the first term. Walked in and sat together. We were often cold (physically). (Student A)

At first we moved around in the room. We tried to sit where we could hear and see. Gradually we moved together. People were avoiding us. (Student C)

Sitting together meant occupying one side of a U-shaped seating arrangement as well as the seats across the back of the room. These students had to travel over 100 km from their home communities to the instruction site. Staying together, but away from families and familiar surroundings, is difficult particularly when their families are central to their wellbeing. In addition, they were used to working with a totally First People's group where everyone was culturally comfortable. This group was enrolled in a culture language program, in their home community, which had 18 students enrolled in it. Upon completion the students earned a certificate that allowed them to teach language culture (1) in schools. Now they were faced with a group of 30 students who were from a mixed racial and educational background. Further, some of the larger group already had university degrees.

We [First People] started to sit together. We were growing as a family. The rest of the group were not as approachable. At first I was like an outcast but sitting together meant we got the feeling of being together we had in (our home community) back. (Student B)

We were going into their territory. They knew each other and they knew the courses. We were invisible. (Student A)

At first, the whole class worked together in a common cause of ensuring the success of all. Importantly, the seating arrangement remained static once the class settled into a routine: this permitted the students to establish themselves within the class but at the same time claim an area of the classroom that was clearly theirs. This meant that the First Peoples in the class started to sit together. While

they came from different educational experiences: some from college and some from the culture language program they were bonding largely through their common cultural backgrounds and their common cause. It also meant that there were two territorial groups subtly being established in the class. But by the second term the group dynamics of the class had begun to change.

B) Second term

One First Peoples student was late for the first day of a class. When the student arrived, all the seats with or near her friends were occupied.

We just had to get broken up. We had no choice. Everyone else had a choice and it felt like I was intruding. (Student B)

In a group of friends they could protect one another. They had established themselves as belonging together. Her friends knew each other well since they travelled together and lived together in a motel room. Indeed, they went so far as to collectively bring food to share in order to have time to study and at the same time keep costs down. Now this student was isolated in such a way that she felt she could not protect herself:

It was not welcoming. It felt like I was an outcast. I had no control in the situation. It felt like I was invading their space. (Student B)

The classroom space was suddenly viewed differently: divided into our space and their space, your place and my place. The sense of unity of purpose that had been achieved in the first term was broken and cast adrift. Within this moment the student's identity is reinforced as being different.

Identity preserved the reason for being within the teaching program: it is why the student was there. The identity manifests itself in the place the student has established within the territory they claimed in the classroom the previous semester. To remove that security placed the student at risk of failure. Separation from the group revealed the cultural importance of being together. It encompasses not only the present but the distant past. Another student went on to say:

We're out of our comfort zone, it's away from home. (Student C)

It is important to view, in the student's perception, the location of their seats as 'home'. Home here has two meanings: 'home' territory, where they are from and 'home' territory within the class. Instructors would seldom recognise an area of class as being a 'home' territory to their students. As well the 'comfort zone' has also been shaken.

Another instance, which occurred, involved Student D. Student D sat between some of her friends and the rest of the students on one side of the class. On the first day of one class, the instructor sent around a seating plan. The plan meant that she could continue to claim the space in

which she was sitting: her security. But upon arriving the second day the tables in the class had been changed from a U shape to separate tables. Her space was now part of a small table separated from her friends.

But I'm small enough . . . no one offered to move. It became my regular spot . . . I could see and hear the instructor and enter into the discussions. (Student D)

Her perception of her shrinking role within this course was perceived as being small, contracting: most of the others were comfortable with their surroundings and not paying attention to how students were distributing themselves around the room. *The small space on the second day became a permanent fixture: it became a constant reminder to Student D that they had a smaller identity within the program. What was strange at first became familiar but carried with it a clear understanding of her diminished standing in the course.* The other students around her, who knew how she felt, felt powerless to change the situation. Routines established in the class may prevent the destabilising of this situation from emerging. It may be that the structures of power are such that there is no room, space, for the student to 'increase her size' over against the other members of the class: she is left in a voiceless state even though she participates in the class.

C) Third term

As time went on other divisions within the cohort began to emerge clearly.

What happens when we present our information in a (mixed) group is they never listen. We will say something and it gets no comment, one of their group says the same thing and they are praised . . . we are looked at differently . . . they think we are being pushed along. (Student A)

The images of the colonial experience begin to emerge through the feelings of how one is treated. 'Pushed along' decries the sameness of the group and silently reinforces the image that in the end there are two different ways of marking assignments: one for the Europeans and one for the First Peoples. It is implicit that the First Peoples will be marked more easily than the others. By extension, this means that their teaching certificate and degree will not be worth as much as the others' and by extension, neither will be yours. This also speaks of the instructors, for they too would be judged as accepting a double standard to ensure the First Peoples' success. There was a very powerful residue of the classroom's space and place and the way in which it had become divided.

I think they were getting tired of First Nations people. They (others in the class) are rolling their eyes like they are bored. We talk about our expert background and we are not going to stop. (Student A)

Learning has become, in this moment, fractured within the class: in the same moment history has collided *within* the space and place in the classroom. What was thought

to be a culturally safe environment has suddenly become poisoned.

Their classroom environment became a metaphor for cultural oppression: an oppression that continues today. They are silenced as in the past days of the residential school. At the same time, the successes of the first term are lost in cultural confusion: a confusion of those who were seen to be friends and those who were seen to be enemies.

Later comments expanded on this theme:

We were singled out. All eyes were on us. It was horrible intimidation. When I said something it felt like the whole class stopped and stared in our direction. I was willing to contribute. (Student C)

When the four students were sitting together it provided a place of cultural safety from which they could speak. They had established a place from which to speak across the space and time of the classroom even though they felt like they did not own it: 'I was willing to contribute'. But we (the First People) in the class were 'singled out', separated from the cohort. The feeling created by the eyes of the other European students in the class is different; these are the eyes of judgement. They are not the eyes we might feel if we are new to a situation and perhaps speaking to a group for the first time. These eyes felt hostile and unwelcoming even after all the time the class has spent time together. These eyes were knowing eyes: they established both place and space and created cultural boundaries which could be very difficult to cross. When the 'whole class stopped', the moment of silence, a pause, allowed for the boundary to be established. 'I was willing to contribute', however, reveals the determination to continue in the face of the day to day pressures of being the class.

D) Conflicting views

But through the conversations a slightly different perspective of the class emerged. Student E, who was sitting at the end of a table between the First Peoples' group and the rest of the students, an interphase position, described a different perspective:

I didn't feel outside the whole group . . . I made an effort to talk to most people in the whole class. I talk to the others during the breaks. (Her friends would go outside to smoke and she didn't join them.) (Student E)

This provided her with an opportunity to meet and talk with the other students in the class. This student was able to mix and mingle with the other students and so felt a measure of acceptance that was greater than the other First Peoples. One situation involved all students (except the 6 who had taken the culture language program) presenting their cultural understandings related to First Peoples. The students from the culture language course were invited to attend this event as they were taking a different course at the same time:

I totally enjoyed the evening. I felt I had more of a connection with them (the rest of the students) than I did before. But I felt there was a visible line. Some of the comments were pushed at the end. (Student A)

While there was the common understanding there was nevertheless an undercurrent in the classroom that suggested the comments being made by the non-Aboriginal students in public were not necessarily authentic. The line between acceptance and rejection was knife edged. Some of the comments were viewed as sincere but others 'pushed at the end'. This indicates that the line could be sensed: one has a feeling that what was being said was to say it, since it was the thing to say in the moment.

The visible line was there but they avoided talking about it. It was a feeling. It was a feeling I would get. (Student A)

The line is both metaphorical and real within the classroom environment. The feeling of separateness was indeterminate, yet you knew it was there. It kept you in your place. The line was very clear in physical terms since the six in the First Peoples' group sat together: they were a definable group. Their territory was spread down part of one side and across the back. That is partly what Student B above is referring to when she says: 'It felt like I was invading their space'. It is the territorial aspect of being in the class. It is not as student D suggests a 'camp' but rather the familiar space of where the group of six sat had transformed itself into a territory on which the learning would take place. The First Peoples' identity is embedded in the territory: culture, language and values are all intertwined in the concept. It has both a physical and cultural presence in their lives.

Coming to the education cohort was to be an opportunity to recognise that a new relationship could be forged between the educational community and the developing professional, a recognition that one would be accepted as an equal. For some of the six students this was not to be.

Reflection 2

Two students from another later Teacher Candidate cohort offered comments on their experiences, in their classes. There were six First Peoples in the group along with seven other students. But despite smaller numbers, the configuration of the tables was much the same as the one described above: they were formed in a U-shape. The size of the group being smaller seemed to offer more cultural safety for the students:

From where I sat . . . I could view everything and felt safe there. (Student F)

This student was sitting on the corner of the U-shape, a position they would retain for most of the first term but they later elected to move.

My own insecurities were behind me. I could be fully aware of everything around me. It was my spot, it was my security spot. (Student F)

The security of position in the location of the seat to a strategy for feeling comfortable in the room right from the beginning:

I always like to be first in the room and have a seat . . . I don't need to give in to my thoughts of what people are thinking. (Student F)

For this student, the security of the location was very significant. But one day the student consciously moved to another seat but a little later decided to move back to their original seat. One of the non-Aboriginal students, who had sat next to them, said:

But this isn't your spot anymore.

In that moment, territory and security disappeared. For some students, a seat is like a temporary camp: a spot to set up for a while and then leave for another place within the room. But for student E, as with the others in the first cohort, the place was much more: it was a place of cultural safety. It may be seen as a territory where the student is able to control their interaction with the instructor and other students in the class: it gave the student voice and security.

What are people thinking? Was it an atmosphere in which I was being judged as Aboriginal? I had a fear of what others were thinking. (Student F)

But in the smaller group the power of the whole was not as intimidating as in the first cohort described in reflection one. A smaller group permitted the student to feel like they were in control of the situation and that they could find a spot in the group. But the importance of the 'spot' was still related to the concept of territory. Describing the seat as a camp is not an adequate metaphor for the First People's position in the class.

I mean I was not allowed to sit in my place. (I told myself) I would cope, adapt. I panicked and started looking for the closest seat. . . . I was expecting my spot, everyone knew it was mine. (Student F)

Student F had a different experience in the class. Their regular seat had become their place; it was their home, their territory:

I was 2 years in the same spot. It's interesting I never wanted to move . . . It was almost like you marked your territory . . . it's like going home, it's a place you recognize and feel comfortable. For me I wouldn't take someone else's spot, it would be an awkward situation. (Student G)

For student F the thought of belonging was routed in the place: it could be returned to time and time again. Other students in the class moved around a bit but silently recognised the right for Student F to sit in the same spot. It is possible that the student retained the seat since unlike

Student E it was never signalled to the rest of the group that there was a desire to change positions in the class: she was always there.

While this group was different the essential experience of controlling their how territory was the same for both. Their safety hinged upon being accepted in the place they had established for themselves: their territory. But for student E there was going back once they had elected to move: it was a shocking surprise to be denied your position in a small group. This meant re-establishing themselves in the new territory

Thoughts

For educators it is too easy to dismiss the importance of where First Peoples may sit in their class. The space and place of the seating in these two cohorts was significant. One of the major themes that emerged in their comments was that of 'home': their seat became a little 'home' in a physical as well as a metaphorical sense, and this revealed itself as a place of safety (Hart & Ben-Yoseph, 2005). It is within the home that the interactions with other students in the classroom environment can either support the development of one's potential or constrict it to the point where a student seeks to withdraw (Madison, 2006). This dualistic nature of 'home' means that the student is able to bring their whole being with them to the room: this would include an embodied attachment to the land or territory (Easthope, Liu, Judd, & Burnley, 2015; Johnson, 2000). While the overt interactions that occurred within the classroom were designed to create an environment of cultural safety, the interstudent relationships were subtly creating angst among the Aboriginal students. These were much more difficult for the instructors to observe. The Aboriginal students' perceptions created a disease, for example, which threatened their educational safety and thus their future success. '(T)hey think we are being pushed along', for example, revealed the division between the Aboriginal students and the western students in the class. In effect, such a perception could lead to the alienation of all of the First Peoples in the class. The western students would be at home in the university system which is modelled after the European system. Hayes (2007, p.3) suggests that nonaboriginal students gain by being able to distance themselves from their home and thus see new possibilities through acquiring a quality of self-examination and self-knowledge. Viewed in this way, the non-aboriginal students are expanding and protecting their own self-interests, which is another form of colonialism. For Aboriginal students in teacher training, being in the program was itself alien given the history of the residential schools in the area, Province and Canada. How the Aboriginal students in the first group were able to resist the threat to their completion of the program may have had something to do with their previous history

The visible line was there but they avoided talking about it. It was a feeling. It was a feeling I would get.

Amsler (2015), in writing about the work of Bonaventure de Sousa Santos, describes this line as the division between the global south (nonwestern) and the global north (for the most part Western Europe and North America). Santos suggests that an authentic understanding of the meaning of the line is to reassess Knowledge-as-Emancipation. (Santos, 2014, 136–139) That is the broader divisions between the north and south need to reflect the way in which each understands and respects the differences in their respective epistemologies. This educative activity requires 'learning ignorance and educating hope' Amsler (p. 1006). It is suggested Santos's work is relevant to the 'visible line' that the student suggests since, in effect, it is a line divided by different histories and epistemologies. The mutual respect of each group's epistemology is important within the concept of cultural safety which is promoted within the program. Understanding the differences requires that an environment of ignorance (understanding little of the other's culture) encourages an environment of hope. This position has a resonance with the work of the Blackfoot philosopher scientist Leroy Little Bear. Little Bear suggests that Blackfoot physics and western physics have much to learn from each other. (Video is available at <http://congress2016.ca/program/events/little-bear>) It is implicit in all of this work that one way of knowing is not attempting to dominate or 'take over' the other rather that each way of knowing may offer new ways of understanding a situation or problem. In a similar fashion, the Western students and the Aboriginal students have much to learn from each other: at the heart of this is honest respect for the various ways of knowing that each brings to the classroom. For the instructors in the program the message from the students in the reference to the line is clear: they must become more sensitive to the intercultural nuances in the classroom and how they are being perceived by both groups.

For Aboriginal students the home that is established within the classroom is reflective of their home territory. They bring with them an understanding of the home territory that is part of the culture in which they live: the land, the home and the person are inseparable (Bolton, & Richard, 2013; Sterritt, 2016). Stability is an important part of this life. This is illustrated by Macdonald (p. 10), an anthropologist who wrote extensively about this reserve, when he discusses the re-establishment of the Feast hall on the Kitsumkalum Reserve: . . . "for Tsimshians, the interests are a bundle of rights to symbolic and material property, tied together while feasting, by the threads of heritage, kinship, rank and realness'. Seating in a feast was set and known to all, it was designated where you would sit. These positions embodied a way of life (Halpin & Seguin). The expectation that you can return again to the places

you have been raised to take your place in is similar to the expectation that you can return the same seat in the classroom: it embodies the home territory and provides a place for the person, family and house. . . . *I was expecting my spot, everyone knew it was mine.* This statement from the student captures the stability that was given to be perceived in terms of the seating in the classroom. It also echoes the non-Aboriginal student who challenged that stability when they said: 'But this isn't your spot anymore'.

First Peoples in the education class created the space for their education, their perception that they created a 'home' territory which would protect them and their cultural practises within a colonial environment allowed them to move forward. Instructors not challenging this setting by insisting that the class rotate or change seating on a regular basis permitted this sense of territory to achieve stability for these students and de facto extend the culturally safe environment which the instructors tried to create within the classroom. The 'foreign' university classroom with its European traditions of education coupled with the history of the Residential Schools suggest the need for teachers to be sensitive to the different ways in which students occupy space in the classroom. That a seat could be viewed as a metaphor for territory (and all that that entails) is likely a foreign concept to Europeans and easily dismissed. First Peoples' success in a program or course may well hinge on the importance of the instructor recognising that the space and place of that seat in the classroom is very important to that student. It is the subtlety with which it has cloaked itself over the years that points to the need to be ever vigilant as the process of de-colonialisation moves forward.

There are in addition many questions that now emerge as a result of this preliminary study: How do the cultural concepts of First Peoples and Europeans (along with others) travel between peoples? How do these travelling concepts convey the lines between the cultures and how does this help instructors better understand their classrooms? How would European students view the perception that 'home territories' may emerge from First People's presence in their classroom? What is the role of the instructor in this situation? Do other First Peoples in other provinces or other countries view their seating in the same way?

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