

Utilising PEARL to Teach Indigenous Art History: A Canadian Example

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This article explores the concepts advanced from the Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC)-funded project, 'Exploring Problem-Based Learning pedagogy as transformative education in Indigenous Australian Studies'. As an Indigenous art historian teaching at a mainstream university in Canada, I am constantly reflecting on how to better engage students in transformative learning. PEARL offers significant interdisciplinary theory and methodology for implementing content related to both Canadian colonial history and Indigenous cultural knowledge implicit in teaching contemporary Aboriginal art histories. This case study, based on a third-year Indigenous art history course taught at University of Regina, Saskatchewan in Canada will articulate applications for PEARL in an Aboriginal art history classroom. This content-based course lends itself to an interdisciplinary pedagogical approach because it remains outside the traditional disciplinary boundaries accepted in most Eurocentric-based histories of art. Implementing PEARL both theoretically and methodologically in tandem with examples of contemporary Indigenous art allows for innovative ways to balance course content with the sensitive material required for students to better understand and read art created by Indigenous artists in Canada in the past 40 years.

■ **Keywords:** Indigenous art history, transformative education, PEARL

Teleology and hierarchy are prescribed in the envelope of the question.

Jacque Derrida, 'The Parergon'

I grew up with stories; lots of them, and all kinds. Some were nonsensical, others were riddles. There were ahtyokaywina, the sacred stories, and others that were tahp acimowina, the family histories.

Maria Campbell, *Life Stages and Native Women*

Teaching Indigenous art history in a post-secondary institution in Canada remains a political exercise that demands far more consideration pedagogically speaking than a simple curriculum related to the history of art might typically offer. Educators of Indigenous areas of study at universities in countries such as Australia, New Zealand and Canada regularly face such demands because we remain saddled with the legacy of British colonialism that complicates the delivery of course materials. In this essay I use the terms 'Aboriginal', 'Indigenous', and 'First Nations' interchangeably to refer to the original peoples of Canada.

My recent experience as the external evaluator on the 2-year Australian Learning and Teaching Council (ALTC)-funded project led by Elizabeth Mackinlay prompted me to

assess my own pedagogical tools. According to Mackinlay and Barney (2011), because we as educators of Indigenous subject matter unavoidably insert debates around topics such as racism, colonialism, identities and responsibilities as Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples into our course content, teaching and learning approaches that facilitate transformative learning remain a central concern. Transformative learning in this context serves an inclusive term that includes, for example, the use of self-reflexive narrative elements to honour multiple truths. Transformation occurs in more than one sense — one goal includes an ontologically transformative process. Yet, transformation also emerges as a decolonising effort that instills new ways of teaching and learning and engenders an awareness of the colonial past and present to engender dialogic shifts. The ALTC project provided critical tools for educators teaching Indigenous issues in a variety of both content-based and more practical courses.

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The development of the term 'PEARL', a key outcome of the research project, challenged me to reconsider ways of teaching and learning in an Indigenous art history classroom (Teaching4Change, 2012). My third-year course, titled 'Contemporary Aboriginal Art and Colonialism', shall serve as an illustration for deeper consideration related to how transformative learning strategies inherent in PEARL apply to this Canadian case study. This essay will articulate theoretical applications for PEARL in an Aboriginal art history classroom in Canada, and at the same time demonstrate how *pearls* or prompts facilitate the theoretical aspects of these concepts.

One's definition of pedagogy remains fundamental to the questions we ask about teaching and learning. Hodgson-Smith (2000) defines her understanding of pedagogy in Aboriginal education within her location as a Métis woman living and teaching in the province of Saskatchewan in Canada as 'an act of love' (p. 157). The effectiveness of courses, programs, and institutions to shift discourses toward a transformative process requires approaches to learning that honour Indigenous ways of teaching and learning in curricular design and implementation. As an Aboriginal educator trained as an art historian, I, too, find that my pedagogical understandings derived from my location as a mixed blood Lakota woman living on the Saskatchewan prairie in 2012 and teaching mostly mainstream students about contemporary Indigenous art histories of Canada. Educator Margaret Kovach argues that Indigenous researchers have a 'natural allegiance with emancipatory research approaches' (2005, p. 20). Indigenous methodologies draw from both a variety of interpretive and critical/emancipatory theories mixed with Indigenous ways of knowing that include a spirit of collectivity, reciprocity, and respect (Wilson, 2008). I will argue that PEARL, as discussed in specific detail by Mackinlay and Barney in this volume, acknowledges the capacity to consider pedagogy as a discourse of healing — something complex and intertextual, informed by colonialism and racism, yet one that acknowledges Indigenous knowledge and knowledge creation. Because PEARL recognises the need for fundamental shifts in pedagogy, I view this concept as a significant direction for authentic teaching and learning.

Discussion

Because the acronym PEARL includes multiple meanings and directions, it naturally encompasses the diverse theoretical and pedagogical positions inherent in such teaching and learning. 'P' stands for political, performative, process, and place-based concepts at play in the transformative art history classroom. 'E' resonates with Indigenous ways of teaching and learning where an engagement with course content demands a range of emotion, empathy, and embodiment. The 'A' reflects terms such as active, anti-racist, and anti-colonial, while the 'R' illustrates rela-

tional, reflective, and reflexive dimensions of this form of teaching and learning. Expanding on notions implicit in First Nations teaching models in Canada (Gardner, 2000), I add respect, responsibility, relevance, and reciprocity to this equation. The 'L' refers to lifelong learning, which remains a key tenet of Indigenous education.

Education stands at the heart of the struggle for Aboriginal peoples to regain control and heal communities. Finding ways to teach Indigenous content in ways that acknowledges the complex issues present in content as seemingly benign as art remains a daunting task. Each of the noted attributes accorded the PEARL acronym encompasses a wide range of teaching and learning modalities involved in transformative education. A number of these concepts directly inform Indigenous ways of teaching and learning that I both consciously and unconsciously promote in my courses. Dialogic and unscripted ways of learning remain key tenets of PEARL, not only theoretically, but methodologically also.

The symbolic aspect of PEARL is evoked as a prompt or *pearl* serves as a starting point for discussion of the difficult but necessary materials needed as a basis for discussion of the decolonising messages present in much contemporary Indigenous art. Engaging students actively by utilising specific art works to engage ideas that might otherwise be provided passively in lecture form ensures a more authentic learning experience for all students. Employing art works in this fashion does not conform to traditional pedagogical modes of art history; however, visual culture studies have embraced this direction in the past 20 years (see Mirzoeff, 1998; Sturken & Cartwright, 2009).

I recently reread the introductory essay in a 1993 exhibition catalogue titled, 'Kanata: Robert Houle's Histories' that focuses on works by this nationally renowned Cree artist. The essay was written by gallery director and trained art historian Michael Bell and began:

Even though I took courses in Chinese art and an anthropology course dealing with 'primitive art', my training in art history did not prepare me for non-Western art. The canon did not recognise non-Western art. With the experience of buying native art at the front door of the gallery, I was forced to address the intellectual challenge that is now reshaping the traditional discipline of art history. (1993, p. 1)

Bell's admission has been the experience of many art historians. My educational experience was similar. However, unlike most academics, my first position in academia was teaching Indigenous art history at an Indigenous-controlled institution, First Nations University of Canada, in their Indian Fine Arts department. I soon discovered that teaching art history outside a mainstream institution brought with it many pedagogical differences (see Robertson & Weber, 2007). The majority of the student body was of Aboriginal ancestry and as a result did not require extensive background information regarding colonialism. They also viewed Indigenous art as part of their

own healing journeys, thus shifting how I designed course content and delivery.

I have since moved to a mainstream university where I continue to teach Indigenous art history as part of my course load. However, teaching Indigenous subject matter at a non-Indigenous-controlled institution brings entirely new challenges. Now as I endeavour to insert Indigenous arts into the larger Eurocentric canon of art history, I must find ways to negotiate Canada's colonial past and present in my courses. In order for students to interpret contemporary Indigenous art discourse, I must introduce content and ways of teaching and learning that recognise and respond to Indigenous ways of knowing into my courses to students unfamiliar with this direction. Through content-based art history, I seek to offer students a transformational learning experience that outlines the colonial past and present, including the realities of the treaty system, systemic stereotypes, and also provides a clear sense of precontact, contact and contemporary expressions of Indigenous arts. Indigenous realities are unique and diverse, and teaching these issues demands both creativity and innovation, according to Aboriginal educator Cam Willett (Absolon & Willett, 2005).

Theoretically, teaching Indigenous art histories demands an interdisciplinary approach unnecessary in most art history curriculums. The established format for teaching art history such as Italian Renaissance art or art of the 19th century relies heavily on a canon of accepted body of Western knowledge. Indigenous art history, however, includes a number of key areas of knowledge from which to build its base of knowledge. PEARL's intertextual and interdisciplinary theoretical frame makes space for such a multifaceted approach.

The study of art history since its professionalisation in the 19th century has been influenced by power and the persuasion of the ethnographic subject in assigning an unquestioned subordinate position to non-Western art. The influence of Primitivism haunts the study of Indigenous art. Primitivism, for Edward Said, constructs the Primitives as the modern West's 'surrogate and even underground self' (1978, p. 3). The persistence of the category in art remains deeply problematic. Jacques Derrida questioned the hierarchical classification of the arts and aesthetics in his essay 'The Parergon' (1987). For art historians who study non-Western art generally and Aboriginal art specifically, the weight of the Eurocentric legacy remains entrenched in the historiography and institutionalised in museums and universities. Reference books and internet sources also maintain Primitivism as a referent, making it difficult for students to discern other perspectives. Such biases must be disentangled in the classroom. Art historian Clare Farago (2009) confirms that today the entangled question of power remains present within the discipline of art history generally and she questions why and how ethnographic illustrations came to be seen as 'natural,' existing beyond techniques of analysis and self-reflexion.

Like Farago, I find power inequities present in art historical discourse. After taking my third-year art history course, many students also agree that such exclusionary practices should be eradicated. Indigenous arts are no less compelling than European art traditions, and in fact they often inspire students in ways some aspects of the Eurocentric canon do not. Yet, power inequities reflected in a lack of courses, a lack of resources, and an unwillingness to promote Indigenous arts within the academy endure.

Hierarchical placement of arts, notions of art, and the overlay of racism remain present today and demand a concerted response in teaching this subdiscipline. Forging a path through such politically charged terrain does not present itself to most instructors of art historical course material. It remains an integral part of teaching Indigenous subjects generally. Attention to both theoretical and methodological directions outside art historical course delivery leads to more effective ways to incorporate transformative aspects into such courses. The innovative, practical, and above all, theoretical aspects of PEARL provide tangible directions in reconsidering art historical pedagogy within the larger frame of teaching Indigenous subject matter at a mainstream institution. Indigenous art histories, both precontact and postcontact, have been impacted by colonial issues such as ethnographic framing, the overlay of Modernism and Primitivism in conceiving of arts by non-Western populations, and in considering contemporary arts, how Indigenous artists respond to the legacy of colonialism. PEARL offers a theoretical and methodological way forward in tackling unsettling material needed for the design and delivery of such content.

Three central issues of concern arise when teaching Indigenous art history in Canada. The challenges include: having to provide a basic understanding of the colonial past to students who have not been exposed to information; systemic marginalisation within the canon of art history due to ongoing racist and colonial discourse; and perhaps the most fundamentally difficult one, having to make Indigenous art histories 'fit' into a Modernist paradigm that requires a linear and evolutionary approach embedded into the larger discipline.

Teaching Indigenous art history must be considered as separate from teaching Western art history. While this appears self-evident, it necessarily challenges accepted notions within the discipline. Not only does Indigenous content require a different body of aesthetic knowledge and new definition of art, studying Indigenous arts, especially contemporary art practices that directly reference the political, requires a colonial preface. Cherokee artist Jimmie Durham observes: 'We have a need to maintain and recuperate land and culture that directly involves artistic work with political purposes' (McMaster, 1999, p. 88). In order for students to fully understand the content and context for the histories of art imparted in this course, they first need a real lesson in colonial history and racial hierarchies. Much of the ugly parts of Canada's history has been

erased and ignored outside of Indigenous studies courses in postsecondary institutions. While there is currently an initiative afoot that would require all undergraduate students to take a first-year Indigenous Studies course as part of their degree program, at most Canadian postsecondary institutions, Indigenous Studies courses remain elective courses students take out of interest, not out of necessity. Coupled with the limited exposure to Indigenous issues and treaty education at the primary and secondary levels, few students possess an awareness of colonial issues that confront Indigenous peoples in Canada on a daily basis.

Without a larger frame that encapsulates the deep and long history of racism in precontact and settler history in Canada, students have no way to understand contemporary Indigenous art that 'talks back' to colonial history. Still, laying the groundwork for understanding why things are as they are can come at a cost. First, in a 13-week semester (the standard in Canada), exercises that build a contextual understanding for the art takes time away from other course content. However, using actual art works as *pearls* or prompts in initial introductory class meetings offers students exposure to Indigenous issues through art in effective ways that does not require leaving art objects out of the equation.

One example of a *pearl* that I have presented to students takes the form of a painting by Saskatchewan Métis artist Bob Boyer titled *A Smallpox Issue* (Boyer, 1983). Leaving the art historical importance of this work for a later class, I instead showed the painting without explanation beyond title, medium and date and asked for students to form groups and enter into discussions that emerge from contextual and visual aspects of the work. The work, painted with acrylic paint on a blanket, signifies a practice in British colonial relations when smallpox-infected blankets were disseminated to Indigenous peoples in Canada, infecting whole communities. Although the title hints broadly at this historical practice, the painting does not overtly illustrate this atrocity. The work more subtly references the spread of the disease with abstracted circles meant to mimic smallpox sores. The composition of the work illustrates an Indigenous-inspired series of registers. The top layer includes three geometric designs that read as tipis within Canadian plains visual aesthetics. The triangular forms of these lodges, or homes, are easily identifiable to Canadian students and can be related to how the disease struck peoples in their own homes. Yet, while this artwork symbolically tells of colonial and racist practices, the blanket on which it is painted can also serve as a vehicle for study and knowledge building. Beyond the dissemination of the infected blankets, other meanings might be ascribed to the blankets. For example, First Nations peoples use blankets for warmth and comfort and thus the medium of this artwork could be viewed as a healing discourse meant to move beyond the anger and harm inflicted by said blankets.

Working in groups of four, students spend one hour discussing the work and beginning preliminary research. As groups discuss the work through a variety of lenses, I circulate among each group to make sure students find ways to consider this piece beyond the established art historical frame. In the following class meeting, each group reports back to the larger group about their findings. Students make creative and insightful links to Canada's colonial past, uncovering relationships to the art and cultural histories they would otherwise miss.

After a discussion of group findings, feelings of 'white guilt' and cognitive dissonance commonly arise. Many comments demand further discussion and engagement, leading the class away from the art itself, but toward a more meaningful comprehension of the subject matter. The relative unscriptedness of the *pearl* remains a key feature of this form of pedagogy because it fosters a wider range of responses that lead students to ideas they find meaningful. Rather than lecturing students on the issues involved, they instead make connections on their own. The dialogic format of PEARL further reinforces transformative learning processes because this exercise allows students to take ownership of discussions and of their knowledge acquisition. What emerges, then, is an authentic opportunity that pushes students in a variety of directions beyond what takes place in a formal lecture setting.

Bob Boyer's artwork sets the stage for a deeper engagement of contextual information that helps students invest in the subject matter. Students connect to the work, reading it both formally, semiotically, and contextually, seeking ideas and directions to inform themselves. Group settings provide students with a safe environment for exploration because they utilise Boyer's painting in ways that invites dialogue and research without preconceived notions about the work. The range of findings reported in the following class meeting demonstrate the creative and intuitive approaches students elicit in order to formulate opinions. Clearly, some students are more receptive to this *pearl* than others. However, all students in the course find ways to engage with this art beyond an art historical context. Reintroducing *The Smallpox Issue* later in the term, no longer as a *pearl* but within an art discourse enriches the learning experience in two significant ways. First, students view the work as a vehicle to drive sensitive discussions related to racism and colonial history and traditional uses of blankets in precontact times now implied by the image, and second, the painting's reintroduction serves as an important art historical contribution. Students readily acknowledge the efforts of this artist to inspire a generation of other artists who begin in the late 1980s to comment on Canada's colonial policies.

By utilising art objects as *pearls*, outside of an art historical contextual pedagogical delivery, a more open-ended framing occurs that, as Mieke Bal suggests, 'opens up rather than shuts down possibilities of analysis' (2002, p. 140). One consequence of this form of delivery arises

from the realisation of the unstable position of knowledge. PEARL and the implementation of *pearls* endorse this instability because it leads to a different kind of grounding that reaches out to intertextual cultural analysis. Rather than turning students into unified clones of instructors, students are confronted with different ways of learning. However, another layer of complication arises when students begin to research topics related to Indigenous art history in this same course. Extant written analysis of Indigenous arts, too, remains a hurdle when teaching a course such as this. Beyond assembling materials for instruction, students face a difficult road in completing written research assignments. Faced with a scientific discourse found in anthropologically oriented treatises and essays, students find discord between the class lectures and materials available for researching topics. Most writing by Indigenous artists and curators on topics related to contemporary Indigenous art is not published in academic texts, but instead in exhibition catalogues. This presents problems for students because access to such materials remains limited and often not available in university library holdings. One disconcerting result is that including Indigenous voices in student research can be frustrating. For example, two of the seminal exhibition catalogues published in response to the 500th anniversary of Christopher Columbus's so-called discovery of the Americas in 1992, *Land, Spirit, Power* and *Indigena*, are not in print and are largely impossible for students to access.

Still, perhaps the most challenging aspect of teaching Indigenous art history in a mainstream art history department involves the demand by the Academy to have these art histories 'fit' the art history's disciplinary model. At the heart of art historiography remains not only a deep Eurocentric bias regarding the definition and direction of art history, but also a discipline organised within a modernist frame that implicitly recognises a linear perspective of time and also an enlightenment understanding that art has continued to evolve. Granted, with the adoption of postmodern ideas, the discipline of art history has radically shifted and the notion that humankind and art continue to improve is largely discounted. However, the linearity of time continues to be an organising principle of art history and this does not work well with all Indigenous art histories — especially precontact arts. The hangover of Primitivism remains.

One example I use in my classroom involves a juxtaposition of two rock art examples. When teaching the mainstream survey course of Art History 100 taught in all universities in Canada the first chapter of the text — any art history text — introduces students to Paleolithic cave art. Mostly, students view slides of the Spanish caves at Altamira and the French cave site of Lascaux. Students are shown work that was created between 50,000 and 20,000 years ago. It is the beginning of art and we know nothing beyond the archeological record of what this work might entail. We view it through an aesthetic lens, and often both

art historians and students alike are eager to move on to art that is more engaging. Each art history textbook includes a timeline in the back of the text to further reinforce the ways in which art historical pedagogy remains implicitly Eurocentric. Art fits neatly along a continuum so that students can be assured of the direction of both time and culture as it marches ever forward. Since the first art historian Giorgio Vasari wrote in 16th-century Florence about the art and artists of the Italian Renaissance, this linear progression has been embedded in the discipline for more than 500 years.

In my course, I contrast this entrenched way of considering art with another image that forces students to consider different ways of thinking about time. Most Indigenous cultures do not ascribe to this linear perspective of time. Living in concert with rhythms of nature has dictated different ways to consider time culturally. The linearity that organises non-Western art today has mostly been designed by archeologist and anthropologists who unquestioningly situate the art on that continuum based sometimes on stylistic pottery design, sometimes on architectural innovations. For example, in the American Southwest, pottery is dated related to colour and design, similar to the practice set out in organising Greek pottery of the ancient period.

In order to illustrate how radically different Indigenous notions of time are for cultures I show my students a display of two images on the screen. The first is a cave painting taken from a first-year art history textbook regarding the art at Altamira in Spain. This is art that can be dated to a certain date, it was made and used for a limited time, and today is only known about because of the work of archeologists and art historians who study it from an aesthetic perspective. The second image projected is a photograph taken from a rock art site in Peterborough, Ontario, in Canada, described as 'visual mediators between two worlds' by art scholar Gerald McMaster in his seminal essay, 'Towards an Aboriginal Art History' (1999, p. 88) because they remind Aboriginal peoples of the mysteries of the land. I could just as easily choose any site in the Americas, or Australia, for that matter, to serve as a counterpoint. The Canadian site is dated to about 10,000 years ago — it may well be older, oral histories tell us it is, but the Academy refuses to admit that Indigenous peoples have been in the Americas for much longer (Deloria, 1997). To do so would disrupt their faith in the Beringia or Bering Strait Theory that states that all Indigenous peoples of the Americas arrived via a land bridge of ice that formed 10,000 years ago. This example of rock art was used in ceremony 10,000 years ago; it was used 9,000 years ago; it was used 1,000 years ago; and it was used 500 years ago as explorers were entering the territory of the Huron and Odawa peoples of that region. This site continues to receive Elders and community members who gather at the site for ceremonial and community activities. The layers of art and cultural knowledge inherent in this formation

speak clearly to the people of that territory today, as it did over thousands of years. In this way, we cannot easily place this site on a timeline. It defies the Western organising system that neatly places the entire history of art on a nice straight line.

Conclusion

Teaching Indigenous art history in a mainstream university in Canada at times feels like a call to arms rather than a content-based course within an accepted discipline within the academy. I am not alone in realising that all who teach Indigenous issues enter a politicised space. Teaching and researching in this area requires a commitment to activism as well as a thick skin. As an Indigenous researcher and instructor, my presence in the classroom can sometimes be considered political and disrupt the kinds of discussions that might otherwise form. However, one cannot hide from, but must embrace, the political nature of these discussions. Kovach (2005) acknowledges a similar experience as a doctoral candidate in a PhD methods course when she discovered that fellow classmates interpreted her stepping out of a classroom discussion to use the restroom as a political act. Indigenous academics in Canada remain political by their very presence. Indigenous course content also suffers from its politicised nature. Slowly, but not too slowly, I hope, this will change as more students begin to question the established Eurocentric canon and demand the insertion of 'Other' arts within the University. PEARL offers tools to more readily invest such knowledges and ideas into such classrooms.

PEARL initiates both methodological and theoretical direction for teaching Indigenous art histories. More easy to articulate are the implementation of *pearls* in the curriculum. More difficult, but also more significant, I believe, remains the theoretical dimension that PEARL offers educators such as myself. As Indigenous academics struggle to find theoretical frames informed by transformative and anti-oppressive paradigms acknowledged in academia, we also search for tools that allow for the incorporation of Indigenous ways of teaching and learning. Various emancipatory and critical social science methods, such as feminist research and Freirian participatory research inform the theoretical position allied with PEARL. The strength, for me, of PEARL, in relation to teaching Indigenous art histories remains in the flexibility inherent in its philosophy. The interconnectedness of Indigenous philosophies with new ways of teaching Indigenous art histories easily find resonance in PEARL. Theoretically, space is made for the articulation of Indigenous ways of teaching and learning, themselves multifaceted and open to interpretation. The rigorous need for reflexivity and reflection means that PEARL remains subject to constant scrutiny and change. I welcome such pedagogical support in my teaching and research.

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