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Transformative, Intercultural Learning from the Indigenous Teaching Circle: Creative autoethnographic reflections on dialogic, holistic education with place

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Abstract

This reflective, creative autoethnography explores an intercultural, dialogic pedagogy of transformative learning that has historically been taught as a teaching circle in indigenous communities. The focus is on what this alternative learning process means to a non-aboriginal learner, artist/teacher, and whether the circle pedagogy can be collectively engaged in the classroom by non-aboriginal and aboriginal teachers/learners. Through a visual and poetic autoethnography, the researcher presents her thematic reflections on her learning experience. The study concludes that aboriginal and non-aboriginal teachers/learners may benefit from the teaching circle process because it is a participatory model of transformative education that is grounded in the holistic pedagogy of place.

Keywords: holistic education, place-conscious learning, alternative learning, creative autoethnography

Introduction and Background

In this paper, I render my reflective and creative autoethnographic research notes that reveal my transformative learning experiences with the indigenous, holistic pedagogy of teaching circle. The inquiry focuses on what this learning process means to me, a non-aboriginal learner, and whether the circle pedagogy may be collectively practiced by non-aboriginal teachers and learners in the classroom. This research is grounded in my personal experience with the circle that I had an honor and privilege to attend as a learner in 2012. The program was offered to all interested aboriginal and non-aboriginal educators and the public at a local community center. We were given permission and encouraged to reflect on our intercultural learning experience and to share it with others. Bai et al. (2014) found that intercultural experience is different from cross-cultural because the former involves identity transformation, and the latter is about geographical similarities and differences among cultures. My intercultural reflection on my learning experience teaches me that aboriginal and non-aboriginal learners may benefit from teaching circle because its dialogic pedagogy (Carson, 1999;Freire, 1973) embodies a holistic model of education that is grounded in the indigenous pedagogy of place. This model is transformative and holistic because it helps its participants recognize themselves and each other as the creative authors of their learning experience and lives.

Purpose of the Circle: Historical Overview

The teaching circle was led by a diverse group of indigenous leaders from different backgrounds and professions. The program was held on a weekly basis for the duration of eight weeks. Each meeting lasted about 1-2 hours once a week. There were about 15-20 registered students. The purpose was to develop an intercultural, educational meeting ground of mutual understanding and well-being for the public. The circle pedagogy embodies Seven Grandfather

Teachings of Anishinaabe people. The Teachings were given at the dawn of time to Anishinaabe people, and they state the importance of Respect (Minwaadendamowin); Love (Zaagidiwin); Truth (Debwewin); Bravery (Aakodewewin); Wisdom (Nibwaakawin); Generosity (Miigwe'aadiziwin); and Humility (Dibaadendiziwin) (Kimewon, Pitawanakwat, Noori, 2011). Historically, teaching circles have been practiced by many indigenous communities as a spiritual, transformational, and ecological process of healing, learning, knowing, and being (Cajete, 1994; Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy, 2014; Regnier, 1994; Zimmerman & Coyle, 1996). Some of the first circles in North America were conducted for the purposes of community-based leadership that was meant to give voice to all band members and was usually led by a chief (First Nations Pedagogy Online, 2009). Specifically, the first leadership circle originated in "the Woodland tribes in the Midwest North America, who used it as a form of parliamentary procedure" (Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy, 2014, para. 2). In this model, everyone has an egalitarian place, which means that "everyone can easily see and hear everyone else and no one holds a favored position" (Cowan & Adams, 2008, p. 137). Thus, the basic structure of circle is democratic, participatory, and community-based. In fact, the concept of democracy originated within indigenous circles as a social context of inclusion of all band members in a decision-making process (Gage, 1893).

Furthermore, the circle has many meanings and pedagogies, including talking circles, sharing circles, healing circles, peacemaking circles, and sacred circles (Osborn, 2010; Pranis, Stuart, & Wedge, 2001). For example, talking circles may be defined as a "group of individuals working together in an intentional way to address a concern or a task brought to the circle" (Osborn, 2010, p. 2010). This intentional process should be shaped by a collective sense of respect toward each other. The context is often heart-felt, which means that everyone should clearly and intuitively speak from the heart without any interruptions (Mehl-Madrona &

Mainguy, 2014). Generally, a facilitator opens each circle with a prayer and a circle theme. Then, everyone is expected to share their feelings, thoughts, and experiences in the context of the theme without any judgments, doubts, and hesitations (Baldwin, 1994; Baldwin & Linnea, 2010). According to the First Nations Pedagogy Online (2009), circles create a learning environment of subtle energies that allows everyone to participate in a dialogue as well as to co-create meanings. Specifically, "the nuance of subtle energy created from using this respectful approach to talking with others provides a sense of communion and interconnectedness that is not often present in the common methods of communicating in the classroom" (para. 1). Hence, circles are often considered sacred because they "symbolize harmony and the belief that life occurs within a series of circular movements that govern their relationship with the environment" (Regnier, 1994, p. 129). These movements embody the power of the world that "works in circles, and everything tries to be round" (Black Elk & Oglala Lakota, 1930 as cited by Pete, 2004, p. 3). The inner awareness initiates a transformative learning process that does not "isolate the self as an entity beyond material consideration" (Nemiroff, 1992, p. 56). Here, the self means the "inner subjective life" that is often defined as a soul or soulful experience (Schreiner, Barnev, & Oxley, 2005, p. 89). Interestingly, this experience occurs naturally when people participate in circle without any predetermined goal in mind or without any instrumental reason for their participation. In the literature, this experience is described as the magic of circle,

> when the best (or sometimes the worst) comes out of us and we find ourselves capable of responding with a level of creativity, innovation, problem solving, and visioning that astounds us. Others talk about circle as an experience of synergy, as being able to tap into something they did not know was in them and could not have predicted as possible outcome at the start of a circle meeting. (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010, p. 6)

Likewise, our circle also had its spiritual magic with its dialogic energies and creative transformations. Absolon (2010) eloquently explained that "spirituality is inherent in Indigenous epistemology, which sees everything in relation to Creation, the earth and recognizes that all life has spirit and is sacred" (p. 78). Hence, circle creates a pedagogy of unity in diversity (Cajete 1994). The spiritual foundation is inclusive and intercultural in its teaching/learning processes that respect individual differences and idiosyncrasies, as well as develop a collaborative sense of social cohesion and community among all learners (Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy, 2014).

However, it is important to note that circle is not a religious ceremony with some transcendental ideals; thus, its meaning-making processes are not ritualistic and dogmatic, but personal, creative, and intuitive (Mehl-Madrona & Mainguy, 2014). Autumn explains that "the circle in itself is not a ceremonial practice...The circle is utilized by Indigenous peoples to repair harm, strengthen relationships, and improve communication to find learning-based outcomes" (as cited in Riestenberg, 2012, p. 87). Generally, circle promotes "education for life's sake" (Cajete, 1994, p. 33). Circles inform research, create holistic educational leadership models, and build curricula through collective dialogue (Regnier, 1994). Holistic education is a process of collective participation that is attuned to the natural world. Cajete (1994) described this process as a creative engagement with life-world, "education is as its essence, learning about life through participation and relationship in community, including not only people, but plants, animals, and the whole of nature" (p. 25). This way of learning emerges "with[in] an ecologically interdependent view of the cosmos" (Slattery, 1995, p. 19). Hence, circle pedagogy is about one's inner explorations and connections within nature and mysterious cosmos. Forbes (1979) wrote that circle creates a reflexive way of understanding the self in relationship with the Universe,

> We are children of the Great Spirit, children of Mother Earth, children of the sky...We live in a world of many circles and these circles constitute our identity and they go out to encompass everything that there is in this Universe. (p. 5)

In this vision, circle is a transformative place of learning through meaning making, self-authorship, and leadership (Cajete, 1994). Also, "circles are a symbol of sustainability, and the circle process enhances educational sustainability" (Liz Campbell, personal communication).

What is Transformative Learning?

Transformative learning is an ontological, holistic event (i.e., a way of being), which means it is an act of consciousness because its "focus is on how we learn to negotiate and act on our purposes, values, feelings, and meanings rather than those we uncritically assimilated from others- to gain greater control over our lives as socially responsible, clear thinking decision-makers" (Mezirow, 2000, pp. 7-8). The concept of consciousness here signifies an embodiment, which includes senses, feelings, emotions, ideas, and intuition among other embodied experiences. Freire (1982) explained that learners "become consciously aware of [their] context and condition as a human being as Subject…[and] become an instrument of choice" (p. 56). This act of becoming is the ontological transformation of an individual learner from a passive recipient of information to an active, free thinker. In this view, the act of learning involves one's ontological transformations that people often experience as artistic engagements, bursts of creative energies, epiphanies, and spiritual insights (Willis, 2012). Likewise, Freire defines transformative experience as a dialogic act in the world, in which the world and the actor come into being together, defining reality with their presence, their co-being (1998). Thus, the sense of self is no longer about oneself as an object of an ethnic, national, gender identity but a situated process of being in and with a changing reality. In a dialogue with Ira Shor, Freire says,

> The dominant ideology lives inside us and also controls society outside. If this domination inside and outside was complete, definitive, we could never think of social transformation. But transformation is possible because consciousness is not a mirror of reality, not a mere reflection, but is reflexive and reflective of reality. (1998, p.13).

Reflexivity means not only one's ability to form self-reflections, but "the deep attention to individual positioning within social…and ecological and spiritual contexts" (Tanaka, 2016, p. 10). These contexts represent a cultural space of consciousness, through which transformations take place. Precisely, this space is where "the individual lives her or his life" (Greene, 1973, p. 14). It is a personal hoop or the electromagnetic field of one's thoughts, ideas, past deeds, intentions, hopes, and imagination (Baldwin & Linnea, 2010). According to Shugurensky (2002), transformative learning emerges within this space of consciousness and through self-conscious reflections upon one's place and its sociocultural factors that influence its content:

> Context is especially relevant in explaining the connections between individual and social transformation. For instance, a supportive social environment, a social reality that is susceptible of transformation […], and a sense of community are important elements in creating the conditions for social transformation. (p. 62)

Therefore, circle creates an ontological context and holistic process of transformative learning that does not restrict the individual in the freedom of thought, expression, and reality s/he seeks to resist, decolonize, and experience. Baldwin and Linnea (2010) explain that circle is composed of many inner circles or hoops that often overlap and interact in a number of complex and mysterious ways, energetically and dialogically. What's more, these learning transformations are a part of a greater mystery in which we all participate. As Ricci and Pritscher (2015) eloquently explain, "There is some mystery to learning and living; to quote one who was deeply

involved with quality, willed learning, Albert Einstein says the following, 'The most beautiful experience we can have is the mysterious'" (p. 9).

In this view, dialogue is not about any preset goals or learning outcomes that should be talked about (Matusov, 2009). According to Bohm (1996), dialogue is "a multi-faceted process…which explores an unusually wide range of human experience: our closed-held values; the nature and intensity of emotions; the patterns of our thought processes; the function of memory; the import of inherited cultural myths" (p. 6). Dialogue allows learners to understand how their feelings and experiences are socially generated. Bohm (1996) found that "recognizing the power of these assumptions and attending to their 'virus-like' nature may lead to a new understanding of the fragmentary and self-destructive nature of many of our thought processes" (p. 8). Dialogue is not about judgment and control; it is about wonder and curiosity (White, 2015). Moreover, a dialogic structure helps people form their relationships with one another and the natural world. Bohm (1996) defines this structure as a new mind that emerges from within "the pool of common meaning which is capable of constant development and change" (p. 10). Ultimately, circle is dialogue.

Methodology

Conceptual Framework

Conceptually, I engaged intuitive learning, including reflective journal notes and generative poetics as my methodology. Intuitive learning is about my trust in my intuition without any dogma or predetermined structure of instrumental methods (Wilson, 2001). For Hampton (1995) research is always about one's holistic learning. At the heart of this methodology is my self-awareness as the researcher-learner. Wilson (2001) wrote that researchers, who work with indigenous methodologies, must ask, "What is my role as the

researcher, and what are my obligations?" (p. 178). As a non-indigenous researcher, artist, teacher, and ally, I asked myself this question and decided to follow my intuition in examining and reflecting on my learning experiences during the circle and, in doing so, creating an ethical space (Ermine, 2007) of remembering my experience with the community. Ermine (2007) developed the concept of ethical space between different cultures that exists when people encounter each other. This space is mainly imbued with one's tacit assumptions and meanings that have to be critically examined. In examining mine, I have attempted to render, respect, and create the ethical space. Hence, my methodology is rooted in my evolving epistemology as the intercultural learner in and through the ethical space of cultural synthesis (Kovach, 2009).

Cultural synthesis can be formed through research when a researcher articulates her epistemology and makes it explicit as the methodology. According to Lewis (2015), indigenous epistemologies encompass "a holistic and dynamic approach to the world, ecologically centered in connections to land and place and fundamentally focused on interrelated relationships between all living things" (p. 97). My poetic notes attempt to deepen, expand, and refine my epistemology, while my reflections help me understand the cultural synthesis of the circle. According to Leggo (2005), poetry is a way of autobiographical remembering one's experience that "connects us with wonder and mystery" (p. 442). That is why I engage the concept of poetry as the intuitive cultural synthesis. According to Freire, cultural synthesis is possible when researchers position themselves with indigenous peoples, not above them;

> The actors who come from "another world" to the world of the people do so not as invaders. They do not come to teach or to transmit or to give, but rather to learn, with the people, about the people's world. (p.181)

In this view, my reflections embody my cultural synthesis, as I continue to write and "reflect while writing, thus engaging more deeply" (Freire, 1998, p. 3) with my learning. Thus, the ethical space begins and unfolds from within the self and my artistic engagements with the circle.

Methodological Design

Specifically, my methodological design is rooted in an autoethnographic inquiry because it is the autobiographical writing process "that displays multiple layers of consciousness, connecting the personal to the cultural" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). These layers are composed through my memorable epiphanies or transformational moments that have resonated with me long after the learning event (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011). Hence, my epiphanies are embodied by the retrospective, evocative, and reflexive vignettes that "refract and resist cultural interpretations" (Ellis & Bochner, 2000, p. 739). I composed these vignettes through the "vivid portrayals" of my field experiences (Erickson, 1986, p. 189). In this vulnerable ethical space, my autobiographic writing presents an aesthetic retelling of my learning process and its critical self-analysis. Clair (2003) found that "aesthetic, like the term ethnography, derives its root-meaning from ancient Greek. Aisthetikos means sensitive; aisthanesthai means to perceive" (p. 87). To write aesthetically is to write through creative expression, perception, and intercultural sensitivity. In my aesthetics, I interweave free poetic expressions alongside the visual memories in the context of textual vignettes that tell a story of my experiences through epiphanies.

As the data, I have utilized my reflective journal that I kept during the learning process, where I recorded thick descriptions (Geertz, 1973), insights, images, and reflections on the developed knowledge. Like Hiemstra (2001), I perceive journalling as a "means for recording

personal thoughts, daily experiences, and evolving insights" (p. 20). In addition, I tried to contextually render my thick descriptions in the journal to understand better my learning processes in the unknown community. Geertz (1973) explained that thick descriptions focus on the concrete details and lived contexts of people's experiences in their own terms, words, and formulas of their definitions. They are interpretative stances, through which I invite my readers to journey into "the heart of that of which it is the interpretation" (p. 317). In doing so, I engage a layered (Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011) visual-poetic textual representation in order to provoke the reader to arrive at their own conclusions and interpretations. Ultimately, this text is "a solo narrative . . . revealing a discovery and retelling an epiphany" (Saldana, 2003, p. 224).

Hence, my data analysis and representation are relational processes that may be characterized as creative and liminal, generative and "emergent, unpredictable and unfinished" (Denzin & Lincoln, 1994, p. 479). In this view, data analysis is focused on coding of the generative themes that capture some of the significant patterns of my personal epiphanies in the sociocultural context of learning and teaching during the circle (Chang, Ngunjiri, & Hernandez, 2016). Basically, I distilled these themes through my theoretical lens and research question by understanding what this learning experience means to me and, in doing so, I tried to understand what learning events took place then (Chang, 2008). Also, I conducted a micro- and macro-analysis (i.e., zooming in and out) of my thematic findings by trying to interpret and connect my personal reflections and its details with the complex cultural meanings that were shared during these particular learning events and also similar learning situations in the literature on intercultural indigenous pedagogy of the circle (Chang, 2008; Ellis, Adams, & Bochner, 2011).

The ethical limitation of my inquiry is in the critical question whether or not my research question, process, and product present a form of cultural appropriation (Young & Brunk, 2012;

Wylene, 2005). According to Wylene (2005), cultural appropriation "is the taking of one culture's artifacts, artistic subject matter, traditional knowledge, rituals, symbols, or technologies by members of another, often dominant, culture" (p. 298). As a white, middle class, immigrant, woman, educator, I am critically aware that education is the taking of knowledge (Black, 2010). That is why I shared this article with the community and asked for their response. Hence, I have not appropriated anything, rather I have reflected on what was taught to me during the circle as a public event.

Furthermore, I tried to respond to one of the calls to action for "intercultural understanding, empathy, and mutual respect" (i.e., 63, iii) that is recommended by the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015, p. 7). However, through my research I found a postcolonial gap in autoethnographic, educational studies that calls for a future research on the ethical problem of cultural appropriation in and through intercultural education and educational research.

Thematic Reflections and Discussion

Imagining Self and Place: Spiritual connections

I enter, sigh, wonder,
Pausing at the threshold.
Am I intruder?
Am I a colonizer of this world?
I enter with empty hands,
Just a blank piece of paper, pen,
Grabbing a chair at the end.
Breathe and write this poem.

(June, 2012, p. 0)

The circle had a smudge as the beginning which meant to clean our thoughts and emotions before the Creator and purify all directions. The facilitator introduced herself, said the prayer, and asked everyone to introduce themselves and to mention their favorite place in the natural world or where they come from. This intrinsic connection with place was a new realization to me, and I decided to poetically render my impressions;

Sage is dancing in flames
Smoke is rising
Above, higher than roof,
Clouds, trains, roads.
Sage is dancing in flames,
Sounds of fire remember
Places, times, stories
In memories' flows,
Ebbs, turns, solstice.
Sage is dancing in flames
Purifying space
Here, we face ourselves,
Places, names,
Smoke is rising
Sage is dancing in flames
Memory rushes through veins,
Faces, wrinkles, ruins,

Rivers of time, sand dunes

Stars, pebbles, moons

(2012, June, p. i)

This poem reflects my new, holistic understanding of place and self. Cajete (1994) also found that indigenous education begins with "honoring connections and the place" because education "is an art of process, participation, and making connection" (pp. 23-24). In this view, place is more than a physical location that has a time in one's history; it is an imaginative space of meaning-making where connections can be envisioned and experienced. Sheridan and Longboat (2006) wrote that many indigenous cultures, such as Haudenosaunee, begin with the place because "imagination is a place and since everything is connected to everything else, the encounter with imagination is a living communication within a sentient landscape" (p. 369). It is important to begin learning from the circle within a creative imagination of the place and self in order to acknowledge and recognize the spiritual interconnectedness of all life. Styres, Haig-Brown, and Blimkie (2013) explained,

> all water, earth, and air [that] is seen simultaneously to be an animate and spiritual being constantly in flux. It refers not only to geographic places and our relationships with urban Aboriginal landscapes but also gestures to the ways that discourses within places inform and are informed by our vision, pedagogies, and teaching practices. (p. 37)

Place is the location of culture and learning that speaks to me in the creative language of personal experience and heart-felt memories. This mutual understanding of our favorite places brought an immediate feeling of spiritual connection with the circle. This mystery also seemed to free me from all forced ideas, as we shared our personal stories about our places in the world in the most comfortable and convenient way for us. Hence, my fellow learners and I felt that we did

not have to talk about something that we did not want to talk about. This was evident from a subtle, collective sigh of excitement and passion that was brought forth with the memory of nature and its wondrous places of our individual and collective being. We had a choice to speak or not to speak. We also had a choice what we had to say, how, and why. That is why I felt that at the heart of the circle is the intrinsic sense of ontological freedom.

After this introduction, all participants seemed to feel at ease with each other, and a sense of kindness and relaxation began to emerge from within the circle and to embrace our community with the smudge.

Free from forced meanings
I felt, standing bare-foot
on the threshold of circle,
Of silence, speech, space
Free from the habit of time, pace,
mind, meaning, word.
Deep within shadows, wounds,
I felt that I found myself,
buried in stories, like moon,
Orbiting object, gravitational pull,
Free from oppression, forces, like solstice.
(June, 2012, p. iii)

Intrinsic Cultural Diversity

I am grateful.
I found meaning:

It is beautiful.

I write pages

In the corner,

I feel like observer,

Wanderer, stranger,

The colonizer of meaning,

Inscribing, translating this presence

Into my own words, memory, stances

cultural stories, contexts, places

(June, 2012, p. i, in the evening)

The invocation of place as an imaginative sense of self suggested to me that the facilitator was also responsive not only to our personal stories, but also to our cultural differences. In the embrace of smudge, all people were welcomed, nobody was excluded because there was no separation and divides among us. We sat there, facing ourselves on the equal eye level. The facilitator also invited the invisible, spiritual teachers, Manitous. This invitation puzzled some learners, as they tried to understand the invisible connections with the spiritual realm. The teacher did not seem to dominate the circle, as she sat within the circle side by side with everyone else.

I invite Manitous,

She said. I felt touched

By smudge, space, spirit.

I kept silence, felt presence.

One learner said, “Are they coming?”

The learner looked scared, she covered her head,

Looked to her sides, up, down, around.

"Why fear? Feel them, they are right here,"

Someone replied. "They are always near,

Near by. So we rely on them, their help.

Also, there are little people, you know.

They live in your home, so you make gifts."

I wondered about unseen, invisible shifts

Of perception, ideas, visions, ways of being.

(June, 2012, p. iv)

I felt that my understanding of spirituality and culture began to change because of this novel sense of diversity, worldviews. Sheridan and Longboat (2006) found that indigenous spirituality is intimately connected with the culture of imagination because "imagination is the spiritual medium of those powers that engage humans without humans being the prime movers of the act" (p. 370). Interestingly, the invisible presence of Manitous invoked my imagination to search for meaning, create it, and to listen attentively to my fellow learners.

In addition, the concept of invisible culture of spirits seemed to dialogically unite all learners. As Shields (2004) wrote, "Thus conceived as an ontology, dialogue opens each individual educator to differing realities and worldviews" (p. 116). In fact, this dialogue created an ontological context of non-understanding, perplexity, and curiosity about these different realms and relations. Interestingly, Matusov wrote that dialogue's focus is not on any consensus but rather on "the misunderstanding, non-understanding, disagreements, puzzlement" (Asterhan et al., 2019, p. 6). For a moment, we just looked at each other with our eyebrows raised. A

learner in front me whispered, “What...spirits, little people...?” Then, we shared our curiosities about the spiritual realm and wondered together about these living relations with sentient beings of nature.

Thus, culture acquired a new spiritual meaning, through which experiences turn into ideas and ideas into experiences. Furthermore, culture seemed to acquire its place in nature and in our imagination of place. Cajete (1994) also found that “culture is an environment subject to the same ecological principles and truths as a physical environment. Culture is a dynamic human creation that is always in process” (p. 191). The new understanding of culture was not meant to be oppressively one and same for all of us; it was a unique acknowledgment of places and our histories. “We are all one. We are all equal before the Creator,” the facilitator said “We are all one with the Creator.” I felt that I was participating in a formation of a new, inclusive, dialogic culture. I meditated on the concept of invisible spiritual teachers that seemed to be the natural world itself with its mystery of creation. Hence, I wrote a poetic reflection on my invisible encounter with a Manitou of nature:

I am nowhere, unseen; yet I am
like the earth, sun, moon, hologram
in the aura of dreams, webs of meaning
at dawn of awakening, new beginnings.
(June, 2012, p. v)

*

I touch an oak tree; it stands just nearby my house.
The bark is wet from rain, dew. The moon is there too,
Reflected in the drops, like crystals, memories of life,

The still-life of this moment. I touch the bark, feel touched.

And tears fall, reflected deep in debris of the past, remembered.

(June, 2012, p. vii)

*

I write at night, words let my fingers dance

Underneath their playful meanings. I type, write, entranced.

I remember the tree outside in the night. It is writing with me.

I feel touched by the presence of trees, invisible on these pages,

Typed, written, printed on paper, grown through the ages, without me.

My words weigh pounds, my words echo fallen trees, land in the colony.

I write at night, hearing thunders, words that remember, embody the tree.

(July, 2012, p. viii)

Figure 1. Meditations with the tree. My journal sketch in acrylic. June, 2012.

In my journal, I wrote about the new culture and spiritual awakening of our places and selves. The poetics about the invisible presence of dreams in new beginnings metaphorically

depicts an attempt to feel the intrinsic unity with the Creator. This unity becomes a critical dawn of my ontological awakening and spiritual vision that allow me to author my creative sense of self.

Self-Actualization: Situated Knowledge

In this context, the first circle brought us together in this inclusive community. On the way home, I was thinking about my situated knowledge in the circle and this new meaning of cultural place. Situated knowledge is about "the knowing self [that is] never finished, whole, simply there and original; it is always constructed and stitched together imperfectly, and therefore able to join with another to see together without claiming to be another" (Haraway, 1988, p. 586). My previous understanding of place and self has been transformed by the collective sense of interconnectedness. Roerich (1924) wrote that cosmos reflects itself in everyone's eyes. In fact, I had never really experienced the significance of a cultural place in education. I had assumed that schooling was education, and education was schooling. The circle not only expanded this naïve assumption, but also fundamentally transformed it. I felt that I was emerging as the author of my education and, consequently, places of life that I inhabit and imaginatively make through learning. As a reflection on the first circles, I wrote in my journal,

> Learning the story of mists,
> seeing drops of the sky, trees,
> gathering leaves for dreams,
> covered with moss, boreal
> trails of deer, leading east.
> beyond slopes of the hill,
> nature of dreams is in

self, growing to be like the sun,

reflected in waves, and the story

of being who is self of the mists,

their dreams, stars, trees,

infinite lives, leaves.

(June, 2012, p. ix)

Figure 2. My meditations on the tree's artwork through a photography. June 2012.

This free poetics expresses my sense of self after the circle and its elusive meanings. Ermine (2007) found that indigenous ways of knowing and learning emerge from within the inner space; this space helps learners to be in harmony with the natural environment. The transformative shift in the poetic is an embodied place of my inner presence where I understand the situated knowledge of the self as the author of my ontological learning experiences and, ultimately, the future of my being. Ontological experiences can be felt and, therefore, expressed through words, images, and discourses (Matusov, 2011). Hence, I see, sense, and experience the

Sun in the water and I know stars. Then, I have an epiphany and realize that I am a part of the Creator because of these mists and stories. Learning emerges from the metaphoric place of inner experience, and I deepen my self-awareness as the creator of my becoming. Here, leaves are no longer the organic tree leaves because they metonymically become the pages that can be authored, written, shared, retold, performed.

Storytelling and Self-Actualization

Learning from circles
Is like seeing mirrors
Reflected in time, histories
I see tragic beginnings,
stories of stolen land
children are taken, abused, beaten
to deaths in residential schools.
crosses stand still in stone, silent
witnesses over thousands little graves,
bare, deforested land thunders, grieves.
The circle erupts with tears, words cease to exist.
(June, 2012, p. x)

Each circle brought truthful stories that helped us understand the complex histories and pedagogies, such as the Creation stories, heart-breaking stories about residential schools, and stories of inner wisdom. Of all stories, I was drawn to the Creation stories because I felt a sense of rebirth and renewal in them. King (2003) wrote that we are the stories, and stories make us as people in the universe of other stories. Creation stories are the most powerful of all

because they help people make making out of culture and, in doing so, to create their lives. He wrote,

> Personally, I'd want to hear a creation story, a story that recounts how the world was formed, how things came to be, for contained within creation stories are relationships that help to define the nature of the universe and how cultures understand the world in which they exist. (p. 10)

Likewise, I learned about the spiritual importance of animals and their stories of cooperation that, in fact, have helped the first sky woman to land safely on this planet and to live good life. This story transformed my previously held patriarchal beliefs about the man as the first human and the woman as the sinful follower of men. McGregor (2013) wrote that indigenous worldviews are about transformation through story and story-telling. These inner transformations often let people lead a good life, bimaadiziwin. After the circle, I reflected in my journal that one of the first feminist leaders, Matilda Joslyn Gage (1893), was also transformed by indigenous people's stories that taught her about women-centered leadership. For example, Gage wrote about the Iroquois' matriarchate,

> The line of descent, feminine, was especially notable in all tribal relations, such as the election of Chiefs, and the Council of Matrons, to which all disputed questions were referred to final adjudication. No sale of lands was valid without consent of the squaws…The women also possessed the veto power on questions of war. [Multiple sources of evidence] demonstrate woman's superiority in power. (p. 18)

Also, Silko says that indigenous cultures are women-centered. For example, she wrote, "The ancient Pueblo people called the earth the Mother Creator of all things in this world. Her sister, the Corn Mother, occasionally merges with her because all succulent green life rises out of

the depths of the earth" (1986, p.1). During the circles we were told that "girls, mothers, grandmothers are all a great honor of the Universe." We were then invited to partake in a ceremony, which felt like a communion to me.

In this context, I thought communion is a transformative learning context that is missing from the dominant educational discourses of patriarchal, colonial, and capitalist societies. By communion, I mean a circle-like gathering where people can collectively reflect on their living realities, social experiences, and historical memories in order to perceive their realities not as changeless, but as processes and transformations (Freire, 1973). The circles taught me that a reality is always a process, in which I am the subject of transformations. In addition, I was able to become a part of the communion with unknown to me people. Freire (1973) found that this sense of communion is required from all educators and critical learners who are interested in their freedom from oppression. Further, communion as an act of "conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth" (p. 61). I felt that I was being reborn through the communion and creative reflections.

Later that day in my journal, I remembered my Ukrainian heritage, and that the indigenous culture of Ukraine, Trypillia, was also a matrilocal matriarchate. Perhaps, it is important to note that Trypillia had existed before the Pyramids were constructed in Egypt (Craddock, 2004). Trypillia dates back to the 3rd century CE (Haydenko, 2011). This culture has been colonized by the patriarchal Christianization of Ukraine as a part of Russia (Kiev-Rus) in 988 AD (Bulgakova-Sitnik, Wolynetz, & Kononenko, 2005). As a result of the imposed colonial regime, indigenous beliefs have been systemically and violently destroyed, such as the destruction of Babas or the Stone Goddesses and Gods, ceremonial grounds, and indigenous ways of life (Subtelny, 2009). Since then, Ukraine as a country has been struggling against its

colonial dependency on the Russian Empire, Poland, and Austria-Hungary. As I reflected on these intercultural connections, circle resonated with me through place-consciousness. This experience can be narrated as the educational practice of freedom. Freire (1973) wrote,

> Education as the practice of freedom—as opposed to education as the practice of domination—denies that man [sic] is abstract, isolated, independent, and unattached to the world; it also denies that the world exists as a reality apart from people. Authentic reflection considers neither abstract man nor the world without people, but people in their relations with the world. In these relations consciousness and world are simultaneous: consciousness neither precedes the world nor follows it. (p. 81)

My journal reflections became a place where I narrate my sense of self in relationships with the world. The journal now embodies the practice of freedom, where I read and write the world in order to change it (Freire, 1973). I began to feel how these new ways of learning emanate from my heart.

Heart-Felt Wisdom

"You all have the heart-felt wisdom," a teacher said to our circle. Hence, I felt empowered with the new sense of self-confidence. "It has been a profound journey for all of us," one woman said at the end of the circles. "I have stopped drinking," a young lady said, "It is for the circle, for the honor." Someone started to cry. The circles came to its conclusion, and we did not want to let the circle go. "We felt touched by the Spirit," another lady said. "I keep coming back to my favorite place in a forest with my daughter," my circle neighbor said, "I am being healed and restored by the place." "I will take the Teachings back to my classroom," a girl in front of me said and started to cry like a baby. "These tears are good, they are healing," the facilitator sighed and expressed our gratitude to the Manitous, Creator, and all directions, and to

all of us, aboriginal and non-aboriginal peoples. “We are all one with the Creator,” the facilitator repeated the opening statement. “We hold the circle to bring understanding to our cultures and the importance of education as well-being,” one of the elders said before our potluck. We all said “thank you” to the vegetables and animals. I walked back home with a poem.

Grass breathes soils
past nurtures souls.
Rocks remember rivers, crosses,
glaciers and oceans when
Forests spread on all directions
As a gathering of stars,
In stones, ponds, reflections,
Songs, voice, stories,
Colonial transgressions.
(June, 2012, p. x)

Self-Transformations

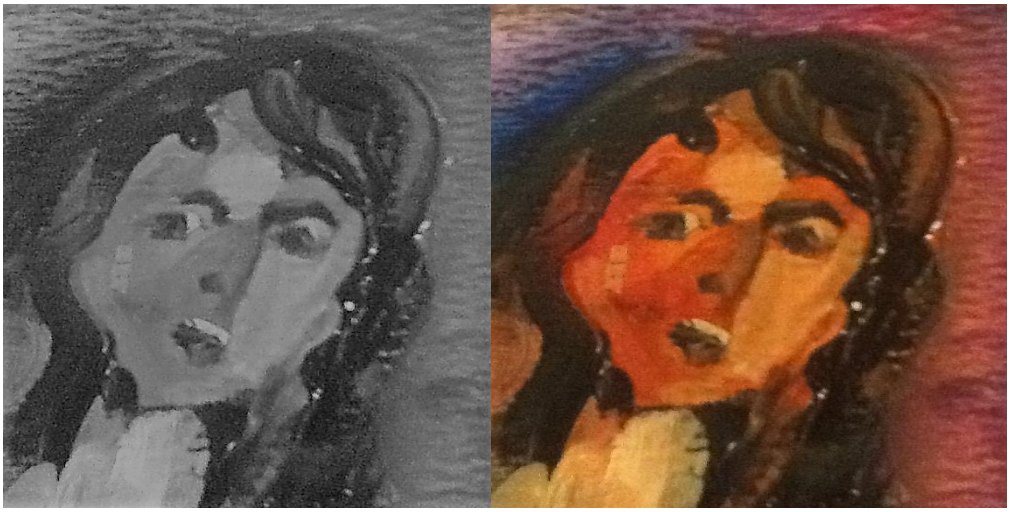

Figure 3. My self-portrait in watercolor on paper. This sketch depicts my growing, creative self-awareness. June 2012

The circle structure of learner-centered, holistic experience emerges from a spiritual culture and cosmology of place that may be compared with Bruner's understanding of the "'other' mode of knowing [where] meaning is personally created and historically generated" (Doll, 1993, p. 124). The focus on spiritual virtues helped me understand their intrinsic values in my life. My thoughts began to change, as I began to feel various transformations of my ideas, beliefs, assumptions, and experiences. Indigenous educators inspire all educators to develop their personal, creative, ecological, and meditative ways of thinking that are different from the forced, heartless logic of colonialism and its systems of objective reasoning (Sinclair, 2004, p.33). The unifying theme of the circle may be defined as "metaanalysis" that is a process of "thinking about thinking and exploring the inner world" (Slattery, 1995, p. 26). During the circle, I was able to understand how I think about myself and how I can change myself toward becoming a more holistic educator, who is knowledgeable and respectful of indigenous ways of knowing and indigenous places. Circle taught me that learning is leadership, and it should always be situated in a heart-felt dialogic encounter with others, including human, sentient beings, and places.

Conclusion

Circle pedagogy allows all learners to transform their intercultural awareness as well as to experience well-being. As an educator, I now make my classroom as a circle, and invite indigenous elders and residential school survivors. My students shared with me that this circular structure is inclusive. One of them specifically said,

> from the moment of walking into the first class, to the moment walking out of the last, I have always felt very comfortable in the classroom because of the inclusion and the learning

> environment. I always felt like I was free to share our opinions, even though I may not have. I love having the open classroom with the circle. I feel as though it puts everyone on an equal level and gives people the opportunity to see everyone while they talk. I have very much enjoyed hearing everyone's openness and ability to be vulnerable. I will very much miss our circle of learning.

In learning from the circle, I have become an intercultural educator who tries to respect the "unity of all in the universe" (Regnier, 1994, p. 14). Education has become a way of life that is moved by spirit. Cajete (1994) wrote that circle is "the [transformative] education about the life and nature of the spirit that moves us. Spirituality evolves from exploring and coming to know and experience the nature of the living energy moving in each of us, through us, and around us" (p. 42). Circle creates a holistic sense of inclusion in "a planetary consciousness ...with an ecologically interdependent view of the cosmos" (Slattery, 1995, p. 19). Intercultural learning begins and ends with the self. Self-actualization leads to inclusive educational experiences that do not undermine diverse needs of future generations and create a communion of co-being with our beautiful planet and mysterious universe.

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