Coming to Breathe an Anti-racist Pedagogy

(a story written by a flatland woman)

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Once upon a time, a young girl dreamed that one day she would walk from the flatland she called home to the distant land of the forest people. But, being a young girl, there was lots of growing up to do before any dreams were taken seriously. So, the girl joined her friends in the day to day life of the flatlanders.

In the spring, as the seeds were tucked into their rows, the flatland children played softball in the dirt fields. In the winter, as the snow fell into its cold carpet, the flatland children made snow men and slid on the ice. Everyone told stories about the valley. She had been to the valley many times, for her flatland edged the valley. Her favourite was stories about cowboys and First People, about floods and tornadoes, about rodeos and dances. But, when she went to the valley, she saw a broken bridge, wire fences, and a roofless stone pump house with big empty windows. The river wasn’t even a river all year, because it dried up by early summer. The valley was full of ghosts.

While the flatland children began to grow up, some fell in love with the flatland and they drifted like dust onto the prairie. But, more of the children talked and talked about the big cities. One by one they left, returning for
weddings or funerals, and sometimes, not even then.

The little girl, who was also growing up, began to feel anxious. She wanted to learn and grow and maybe even become a teacher for the next group of flatland children, but where would she go to learn? Again and again she went to the valley in these anxious years. Maybe the ghosts had the answers, and she imagined and dreamed again, for it had been many years since she dreamed, but the ghosts were silent, if they were really there at all.

As she sat with one eye on the valley and the other on the flatland, she asked her questions: What did the first people see? What was this valley before the rodeos and dances? What was this flatland before the plough and seed? And she never questioned the wisdom of her questions for they came from deep within her heart. To know these answers was to know the valley and the flatland.

Soon it was clear that the young girl would need to go to the big city if she wanted to become educated so she could teach the flatland children. And she took her questions with her. It was in the big city that she fell in love with an Ocean boy, who had fallen in love with the flatland as the crops swayed as endless waves. Soon, other dreams and other questions flooded through the valleys of her heart and for a time the young girl, who was now a young woman, forgot her old dreams and questions.

But it seems that dreams are never really forgotten. One day, the young woman woke to realise that she had journeyed to the land of the forest people – she, a flatlander, and her man from the ocean. And, in what seemed like one long and complicated dream, she lived with the forest people, who, she learned, were first people. And she remembered her childhood questions, and although these first people were forest first people and not valley or flatland first people, they still answered many of her questions. And the young woman began to love the forest and its people and her life became busy with learning and teaching and the growing of her own children.

But it seems that dreams are never really forgotten. One day, the woman woke to realise that she had journeyed back to the flatland – she, her man from the ocean, and her children who were half flatland and half ocean, her children whose hearts had been raised by the forest people. She was angry to have left the forest people. How would her children continue to grow in the ways of the forest people? She realised that all her questions had not been answered, but she did not want to find any new first people to ask her questions of because it was a long and difficult thing to ask the first people questions. They were cautious of what they called the second people because the second people had already taken much from them. When the second people asked questions, they often had the answer already in their
minds, so the first people were tired of speaking to questions that already had answers.

But it seems that dreams are never really forgotten and the woman began to remember her dream of teaching the flatland children. For, after all, these were her people. But, now she had new questions. What would she teach them? How would she teach them?

She decided that she needed to teach the flatland children that they were not the only people deserving respect, for she assumed that they thought this. And when she began her lessons, the children were angry because they already knew this. Still, the woman could not really believe the flatland children understood that there were others because of the way they talked about others: telling hurtful jokes and sharing harsh stories.

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In the summer of 2000 I moved from Northern Saskatchewan to Southern Saskatchewan. I moved from teaching five years on a Dené reserve to teaching in a rural community. I moved from culture shock (being white and “other” in a Dené community) to reverse culture shock (being “other” in my own culture – rural Saskatchewan). Shepard (1998, 22) says, “When expatriates return to their passport country, they are generally not prepared for the very different culture that confronts them”.

I missed the north and I talked about it a lot. On more than one occasion a bewildered listener would say, “Why did you come back then?” I went into an automatic speech, “My grandparents are in their late 80’s and we wanted to be close to them,” or “My husband was the principal and he was getting
I cannot say I entered my new school with a great attitude. I tried to bond with my new students, but the kids seemed spoiled. I was presumptuous enough to assume that the homogeneously white rural students had racist tendencies. My judgements were not entirely dreamt up. Some students would make snide remarks about Natives or chant “Hey-how-are-ya, Hey-how-are-ya”. During the school year, when I was moody or distant, I tried to laugh off my frustrations. I said I was going through “reverse culture shock”. When I didn’t have the heart to laugh something off I talked about “Where I lived for five years”, but I didn’t feel understood or heard.

Shepard addresses this confusion:

Neither the expatriate employee nor his or her family know what to expect socially when they return home. Typically, they expect to be viewed as something special, as “returning heroes.” And they usually are, for the first few weeks. After the stories have been told and the newness wears off, however, their returning hero begins to look more like some kind of exotic jungle specimen than just another employee or neighbour (1998, 25).

After an unsuccessful attempt to champion anti-racism through showcasing a variety of First Nations' literature in my English classes, I stopped trying at all. I wore my Dené beaded moccasins, but I stopped talking about anti-racism.

And then one day, our Director of Education asked me to help plan a “Youth Day”, formerly, “Treaty Awareness Day”. Responsible for planning a pre-teaching and reflection unit on the topic, “The Healing and Hurting Uses of Humour,” I utilized First Nation and Non-First Nation material.

I didn’t think it could go wrong.
Everyone loves humour, right?

Well, some students thought we were trying to “force-feed a bunch of touchy-feely anti-racism stuff.” Some were openly hostile in anticipation of the “Youth Day”.

But, in the end the kids had a good time, especially enjoying the personality and message of Don Burnstick, a First Nations Comedian from Alberta.

During class reflection on the “Youth Day,” I had one amazing double period with the class who had been the most openly defiant. We talked feelings. We talked experiences. Just last year, the reserve students had moved to their newly opened band run school; it finally sunk in that these students had a lot of experience interacting with First Nations kids; they had gone to school with them for most of their lives.
I realised how narrow minded and assuming I had been coming into the school.

In early spring, after I relaxed into my school year, looking forward to June rather than “saving” my students from my notions of their “racism”, something interesting happened in my grade ten class. One of the girls noticed the flyer for *The Trial of Louis Riel* production and asked if we could go and see it. After the event I wrote in my journal:

I cried as soon as Riel began to pray. My students wrote questions (unsolicited) on their programmes. We looked for Riel’s statue at the legislative buildings with no luck. We looked for a plaque in honour of Riel in Victoria Park with no luck. We went to the Main Library and, with luck, found an art exhibit and the statue, all about Riel. It was called “Rielism”! My students wrote a list of questions (unsolicited) to fax to the Riel director. My students discussed the play on the way home. I was driving and could only hear bits and pieces. They read favourite speeches from a text they brought along. Amazing! Where did these kids come from? How can I bottle and sell it? How can students taste discovery? Taste anti-racist pedagogy? Taste living curriculum? How can it be real? Meaningful? Fun? As I drove home with my vanload of kids, I felt transformed. I felt the high of an epiphany that wouldn’t go away.

And now, here I sit at the computer while my rural Southern Saskatchewan students write their Media Studies final. What have I accomplished this year in the name of anti-racist pedagogy? As we watched the play, “Riel” entered the courtroom wearing a suit and beaded moccasins. One of my students turned to me and said, “those are like your moccasins,” and I nodded, full of pride. Is it enough that I wore my moccasins almost daily, explaining to my students how the stiffly beaded high top keeps my ankles warm so my bad ankle doesn’t hurt? First Nation Technology! One of the
questions on the exam says, “Discuss Marshall McLuhan’s ‘The Medium is the Message’.” Likewise, is the teacher the message? Do I want that responsibility, knowing my limitations?

As I think about what to write next I am really struggling. Here is the point in the paper where I should say, “Yeah, but I still have to prescribe my answers for educating a lived curriculum for anti-racist pedagogy.” I should supply a reading list and a series of do’s and don’ts. Here is where I should abandon my “love of ambiguity” (Jardine, 1998) because I must be clear and concise and have it all together.

But, where is the authenticity in this? I do not have the answer!

And as I am struggling, I sit in a Vietnamese Café, on Broad Street in Regina writing on the back page of an earlier draft. I pour green tea into the small cup; I hold it in both hands and brush the hot ceramic against my lips feeling everything green tea means to me: culture, friendship, diversity. And I realise that the purpose of my being here is not to tell the white people, with whom I share the dining room, how to enjoy Vietnamese food, just because I am a white person and I appreciate Vietnamese food so well. As I’m smelling the green tea, and now tasting it, I ask the waitress to bring the menu again. I look up the things I have ordered, but I can’t find green tea. I call the waitress over again, and I’m sure she thinks I’m a tourist. I ask, “Is green tea listed on the menu?” She says, “No.” Isn’t it fun to order green tea without the menu (and it wasn’t there anyway)?

Educating teacher lived-curriculum is a journey; it is transformative. It cannot be purely book knowledge. The journey is visceral on some level. I have happily stumbled on a way of being, for educating a lived-curriculum.

It is okay just to be (Heidegger, 1968).
It is okay to embrace ambiguity Hurren (2000) and Jardine (1998).
It is okay to be where I am and not have all the answers. But, how do I proceed?

Words are tricky. Tennyson’s speaker in “In Memoriam: Canto V”, says, “I sometimes hold it half a sin / To put in words the grief I feel; / For words, like Nature, half reveal / And half conceal the Soul within.”

I will seek metaphor so that I allow these ideas room to bloom and stretch and grow deeper and wider (Hurren, 2000).
I will listen for many voices (Jardine, 1998)
I will write a story and see what the story can say that I cannot.
It was in the summer, after her first year with the flatland children, that she began to dream again. She dreamed of the fun of her own childhood. She dreamed of the forest people. She dreamed of her valley ancestors. She dreamed of really teaching the flatland children.

And when she asked the ghosts, “How will I teach the flatland children?” Again, they were silent, if they were there at all. But in the silence, the woman began to listen, for there was a murmur from the earth as though it were alive. And then the rustle of grass and song of bird and crick of cricket filled the air.

As she reached down and touched the ground, she looked into the sky. And the beginnings of answers formed for her questions, “What will I teach the flat land children? How will I teach them?” And she thought:

I will teach what I learn by being who I am.
I will learn what to teach by being what I learn.
I will be who I am by learning what I teach.

And learning is never finished.
And teaching is never final.
And being is never absolute.

And the teacher is the learner.
And the learner is the teacher.
And the teacher and learner must be.

So, I will walk and listen for the voices
And I will stop and listen again.
And only after listening will I add my own song

to the flatland
to the forest
to the valley
to the oceans

And only in the chorus are dreams fulfilled and questions answered.

Once upon a time, there was a flatlander who dreamed of the forest people –
a forest boy who dreamed of the sand people –
a sand girl who dreamed of the ocean people –
an ocean woman who dreamed of the swamp people –
a swamp man who dreamed of a desert people –
a desert elder who dreamed of the hill people…

And as we bring our dreams together
And as we speak of our fears together
And as we fall in love
And as we teach
And as we grow
And as we learn
We will
Survive
We will breathe.

References


About the Author

Sheena Koops was raised on a farm near Macoun, Saskatchewan. As a child she was passionate about horses and table tennis. She rode bareback through the Souris Valley, before it was flooded, and she played on the
Saskatchewan Junior and Senior Table Tennis Teams.

In addition to teaching in Regina and Wolseley, Sheena taught five years at Father Porte Memorial Dene School in Black Lake, Saskatchewan. Now passionate about writing, she has published four children's stories with Black Lake Education: *The Orange Baby*, *When I Grow Up, I am Special*, and *My Girl*. She is currently working on a fourth draft of a young adult novel and a second draft of a creative non-fiction book. She also writes and sings her own songs. Sheena is currently pursuing her Masters in Education (Curriculum and Instruction) from the University of Regina. Married to a fellow educator, they share three daughters, Victoria, Moira and Arwen Dawn.