



Book Review: Getting out of Your Head, Back into Your Heart

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Abstract:

Michele Tanaka's book, *Learning and teaching together: Weaving Indigenous ways of knowing into education*, documents and contemplates the pedagogical effects of a unique course, *Earth Fibres*, designed by Lorna Williams, and guided by Indigenous elders, to immerse student teachers at the University of Victoria into Indigenous ways of knowing, by having them work with traditional Indigenous fabric and textile arts. In her book, Tanaka repeats the key questions of the course: *How do you get out of your head? How do you get back into your heart?* In the course, the students do this in the context of a culture that destabilizes their normative understandings of the world and of teaching, learning and the curriculum. The book uses the framework of the medicine wheel, of "walking the wheel," and likewise, the student teachers taking the Earth Fibres course are invited on a kind of medicine walk of their own. The book contributes to efforts to Indigenize the curriculum through its thoughtful documentation of the Earth Fibres course itself, as well as the responsive, Indigenist frame in which it has been written.

Keywords: Indigenous education; medicine wheel; teaching; learning

Book Review

Michele T.D. Tanaka. (2016). *Learning and teaching together: Weaving Indigenous ways of knowing into education*. Vancouver: UBC Press.

How do you get out of your head? How do you get back into your heart? (Tanaka, 2016, p. 102). These are slight variations on questions asked by Charlene, one of the co-instructors in the University of Victoria's Earth Fibres course. The course is offered as part of the teacher education program in the Faculty of Education at the University of Victoria. It has been taught twelve times as of the publication of Tanaka's book, which focuses on one of its initial iterations. Tanaka, an Assistant Professor at the University of Victoria, conducted her doctoral research on student teachers' experiences of this course. The course was designed by Lorna Williams, professor emeritus in the Faculty of Education and former Canada Research Chair of Indigenous Knowledge and Learning. The course overcame resistance and obstacles, managing to embed itself within the program. The course is unusual within those on offer within the university's Faculty of Education; indeed, within almost any faculty of education at a North American university. The course immerses student teachers (who are predominantly young, white and female) in Indigenous ways of knowing and being, this by way of having them work with traditional Indigenous fabric and textile arts alongside guides: the instructors (Lorna Williams and Charlene) and the Wisdom-Keepers, the elders who accompany the teachers' learning process. On its deepest level, the course invites the student teachers to find their own answers to the questions—How do I get out of my head? How do I get back into my heart? In the process, they learn about themselves. They do this in the context of a culture that destabilizes their normative understandings of the world and of teaching, learning and the curriculum.

How do you get out of your head? How do get back into your heart?

Tanaka's book reminds me of Richard Wagamese's (2014) *Medicine Walk*, which I read earlier this summer. I read Wagamese's (2012) *Indian Horse* on the train to the Congress of the Humanities and Social Sciences, and *Medicine Walk* on my way back. "It's even better than *Indian Horse*, I think," the publisher representative confided at the Congress Book Fair. In one book, we feel the destruction wrought in Saul Indian Horse by the effects of residential school—one effect in particular that we may intuit, but like the protagonist, do not fully, and tragically, grasp until almost the end. Residential school saps the one thing that gave Indian Horse the greatest joy: playing hockey. It is the one thing that replaced the joys that he otherwise might have experienced growing up amidst his family and in community. In *Medicine Walk*, which is the last novel that Wagamese wrote before he moved on to the next world in 2017, we acutely feel the trying of the son's (Franklin Starlight's) patience as he grants his estranged father (Eldon) his dying wish, which is to be rejoined with his ancestors in the land of his people: a land that the son knows intimately, through hard-won knowledge, but that the father has kept at arm's length. Its memory lies like a relic rattling around in his fevered brain. Wagamese has a beautiful way of writing about difficult things: tragic things. He

also has a way of pulling the reader in, such that the reader walks with Saul Indian Horse, Franklin Starlight and Eldon.

Similarly, Tanaka's book recalls to me the prose fiction of German author and scholar W.G. Sebald, in which the narrator likewise is perpetually walking. He stays in small rooms in out of the way hotels as he travels predominantly by foot through Britain and parts of Europe, along the way encountering individuals whose stories he hears directly or learns about by word of mouth. These people are strangers to him, by and large, but their lives are significant to him (and his readers) by virtue of paths having crossed. The narrator is then invested with the responsibility to narrate, even as the reader inherits the responsibility to make moral sense of stories stacked like multiple egg boxes in a crate (Hutchinson, 2006). Significance upon significance pile up, in a place deeply felt but less than understood.

In a similar vein, Cynthia Chambers (2000), in a talk she gave at AERA, wrote about walking and about memory: "I walk the coulees where I live, searching for animal tracks, beaten paths, deer trails, old cairns and holy rocks, trying to know and understand this place and my place in it." The landscape of coulees initially looks barren and uninteresting but the more she walks, the more she notices and remembers to notice. She notices the meadowlark hidden in the spear grass. She hears its distinctive call. She notices the pear-cactus and its bright yellow colours against browning autumn leaves. She perceives the coyote and the coyote perceives her; there is a stand-off. She imagines its song of living in this land, raising cubs in its den, dying in this land. When she stops visiting, Chambers says, "I stop seeing (or hearing or feeling) in the way the coulees invite." To remember, she has to return and "learn all over again how to walk and watch, learn and listen in this space, which at first seems like it has little to show, not much to say."

The student teachers taking the Earth Fibres course recounted in Tanaka's book are invited on a kind of medicine walk of their own in a landscape that initially may not seem to say much to them in particular. Like Sebald's narrator, they encounter people and experience things that they know are significant but they reach for the words to say how or why. They just know that the experience is significant. Like Chambers, they need to go back often to remember, because otherwise they might forget. The Earth Fibres course lasts a brief eight weeks. One of the most challenging questions that the course addresses is what kind of educational experience would happen? Which and whose knowledge was of most worth? (Pinar, 2012).

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The answers that Tanaka's innovative book gives to these questions are compelling, arrived at through "walking the [Medicine] wheel". The book is Tanaka's but, as she fully acknowledges, the experiences belong to the student teachers and the wisdom comes from the Indigenous instructors and elders. Tanaka's writing is gentle yet firm. The firmness comes from knowing that in conducting the research and in writing about the course, she is on solid ground in using a "good hands" approach: "having a clear mind and healthy intent" (p. 23). The gentleness comes in knowing that she is (at least, originally) an immigrant: someone who has found a home here, in an Indigenized curriculum, but who is conscious of having arrived from another place. The story of the course

properly begins not on page 1 but on page 27, in which Charlene (one of the course co-instructors) recounts her cultural stories: the stories of the moons. These are the stories, which cycle over the seasons of a year, in which the learning activities of the course—the weaving of the cedar mats—are embedded.

The book's chapters are organized through a weaving action as well. Four strands or storylines are woven through "walking the wheel": the medicine wheel. The interwoven stories are told from the perspectives of the wisdom keepers, the pre-service teachers, the Earth Fibres themselves and Tanaka. At one point in her research, Tanaka was feeling stuck: how was she to analyze and represent the wealth of data? She visited Lynne, one of the wisdom keepers. Lynne shared teachings from the medicine wheel (the four directions), and gave Michelle permission to use her interpretation of the Métis medicine wheel in organizing her research. Tanaka came to see the wheel "as a place where the experience can rest for a time, as I tease out and convey some of the stories before they move on, as stories do" (p. 18). The wheel was also used as part of the teachings in the course. It allowed Tanaka to find a place, a ground from which to talk about the importance of the research to all of the participants.

Breathe. Tanaka stops from time to time to address the reader directly: Take a moment. Pause. Notice your breath. "Walk the wheel" and hear first-hand from the student teachers about the experiences they had and the meanings they started to make of those experiences.

The book's first seven chapters are organized in relation to their place in "walking the wheel", following the student teachers in being in the centre (orienting to place and pedagogical purpose); facing east (spirituality: opening oneself to Indigenous ways of being-knowing-doing); turning south (why we teach: rethinking learner-teacher relationships) and orienting towards the north (invoking good intention and conscious action), and concluding with focusing on how and why we teach. The second half of the book offers a rare gift: an extended meditation on the research and its implications for environmental sustainability (Chapter 8), changing dispositions that orient the self towards community (Chapter 9), Indigenizing practices (Chapter 10), re-envisioning teacher education (Chapter 11) and future touchstones/important queries (Chapter 12).

The book contributes to efforts to Indigenize the curriculum through its thoughtful documentation of the Earth Fibres course, itself as well as the responsive, Indigenist frame in which the book has been conceived and written. Central is an ecological perspective. Cajete wrote the foreword to the book and Tanaka adopts his three "simple questions that every teacher should ask" as guides throughout the book, coming back often to address them: "How are we going to deal with the environmental crisis as it is today? How are we going to live with each other? And how do we take care of our own souls" (p. 12). Some might wish more for direct engagement with decolonizing pedagogies, especially in the later, reflective chapters in which Tanaka situates the course and the research in broader contexts of research, curriculum and pedagogy. The real opponent to seeing a meaningful Indigenous presence in the curriculum, both at the university and in schools, is construed as positivism, not racism. By positivism is meant Taylorism and instrumentality in education (Pinar, 2012; Spector, 2016), although Tanaka does not frame the problem in precisely these terms;

curriculum readers, however, will recognize where they are in her descriptions of the numbing effects of a positivistic education. In steering clear of the territories of colonialism and racism—the turn away can be felt almost viscerally every time the subject arises—it also has to be said that Tanaka takes a different tack towards social justice education. This approach is grounded in the Earth Fibres course, as designed and taught by the Indigenous instructors and wisdom-keepers. The focus of the course is not on Indigenous content, *per se*, but (as Lorna Williams says and that comprises part of the academic calendar description) on “Indigenous ways of teaching and learning” (p. 3). The course engages the students directly and immediately “in an experiential educational practice” (p. 3). It is a matter of what Tanaka calls “tender resistance”: of decolonization as vulnerability, caring, mindfulness and dialogic exchanges (p. 164). Student teachers are treated as teacher-learners within the course; all involved in the teaching and learning process are, in fact, oriented as teachers and learners towards one and another, and where one of the pedagogical practices that best remains with the student teachers afterwards as exemplary of this is the circle with which each class opened. What is being learned is a disposition, a voluntary turning towards an Indigenized curriculum because its values and perspectives are in accord with what the teacher has come to believe is central to teaching and learning. This is the position from which Tanaka herself writes. She makes the case that this is not cultural appropriation—it is not Tanaka or the student-teachers trying to own or take Indigenous knowledge and use it for their own ends. Rather, Tanaka explains, “indigenous knowledge began to own the non-indigenous participants”; it became “embedded in their visceral fibres of being-knowing-doing” (p. 165). Understanding, Gadamer (1998) reminds us, is an event; it involves applying what we are learning *to* ourselves, expressed in controversial phrasing that, if Gadamer were here now, he would no doubt re-claim as radical and necessary: “*assimilating* what is said to the point that it becomes one’s own” (p. 398; emphasis added). The course was not without tensions; Tanaka alludes, regularly, to those for whom the course was experienced as “difficult knowledge” (Pitt & Britzman, 2003, p. 755). It was hard for some to digest, against a background of a positivistic education; patience was the regular response of the course instructors. What place did racism play in the teachers’ storied formations, one has to wonder? Which resistances remained latent yet active? Certain experiences are resistant to understanding as application (in Gadamer’s sense) yet essential to recognizing responsibility; the role played by the residential school, for one, in shaping Indigenous education (Daniels, 2013; Yoder & Strong-Wilson, 2017). How would the book’s approach respond to the calls for action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (2015)? Tanaka suggests that all (whether resistant or open) came around, in the end, but that the most formidable challenge facing them, post-graduation or in their practica, were the limited opportunities to try out in practice what they had learned and become excited about learning. She also speaks about the problem of co-optation: of a learning process threatened by a desire, on the part of the university, to showcase the course and its “products”: the teachers themselves and the objects they made. This fetishizing of the course remains part of a larger problem that goes back to that wall of racism.

How do you get out of your head? How do you get back into your heart?

Despite any caveats, what cannot be denied is the power of this course on the students, on Tanaka, and on the reader. We feel as if we are there too, walking the wheel, with Cajete’s three

questions and Charlene's two—the first as a challenge, a kind of puzzle (How *do* you get out of your head?), the second as an invitation (How do *you* get back into your heart?). Come and see. Echoing Cajete in the foreword, come learn how to learn (un-learn/re-learn).

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