Teaching and Learning about Justice through *Wahkohtowin*

Sarah Buhler, Priscilla Settee, and Nancy Van Styvendale,
University of Saskatchewan[1]

Abstract

In this article, we describe an innovative interdisciplinary and community-based class about justice that brought together university students, Aboriginal high school students and former gang members. We called our project "Wahkohtowin" – or "kinship" in Cree. In the first section of this article, we provide some background about how we came together to collaborate on the Wahkohtowin project. We analyze key aspects of the critical pedagogy and methods of the class, including the importance of "Wahkohtowin" to critical understandings of both education and justice. We reflect particularly on the significance of the circle to our pedagogy; the "embodied" nature of learning in the class; and the centrality of personal narratives, both in their own right and as lenses through which to interpret legal and literary texts. We demonstrate how our pedagogy functioned to form a critical counter-narrative to dominant understandings of justice and to empower students to seek ways to resist injustice and work across differences in solidarity with one another.

Introduction

The university is commonly referred to as an "ivory tower," and all too often universities have functioned as exclusive spaces where certain groups are included—typically those

1 Funding for the Wahkohtowin project was provided by the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network.

with race, gender, and class privilege—while members of marginalized groups find themselves on the "outside". Historically, Indigenous peoples in Canada have faced systemic socioeconomic barriers to post-secondary education, and the university has "tended to alienate them from their communities and their origins" (Castellano, Davis, and Lahache, 2000, p. 172). The Indian Act of 1876, for example, decreed the compulsory enfranchisement of First Nations people who earned a university degree (Milloy, 2008); a degree meant the loss of Indian status. This policy was part of an extensive assimilationist educational agenda that also included the residential school system. Residential schools, which ran from 1831 to 1996, were the result of deliberate government policy seeking to remove Indigenous children from their communities in order to "civilize" them and simultaneously dismantle Indigenous culture, language and communities. It is difficult to overemphasize the devastating and intergenerational impacts of residential schools for Indigenous communities, which include the "slaying" of languages and culture and the alienation of families (St. Denis, 2007, p.1073; Duran and Duran, 1995). Today, the intergenerational effects of these colonial educational practices continue, and the university remains a largely neocolonial space, where Indigenous knowledge and epistemologies are underrepresented (Battiste, Bell and Findlay, 2002; Settee, 2013). At the University of Saskatchewan, while nearly 10% of the student body identifies as Aboriginal, the proportion of Aboriginal students still falls short of demographics in Saskatchewan at large, where Aboriginal people make up 16% of the overall population (Statistics Canada, 2014). Clearly, there remains much to do to decolonize and indigenize the university – that is, to make the university cognizant of its exclusionary practices and inclusive of Indigenous knowledge, not as an "add on" to the existing system, but as fundamental to its operation.

It is also important to note that institutions of justice have been, and continue to be, sites of oppression for Indigenous people in Canada. Certainly, Indigenous people are disproportionately impacted by the criminal justice system. Saska-

toon has a particularly troubling history of Aboriginal-police relations: the freezing deaths of several Aboriginal men and the experience of Darrel Night brought public attention to systemic racism in the police force in the earlier part of this decade. In addition, Saskatchewan incarcerates more Aboriginal people per capita than any other province: according to a recent census report, 78% of adult admissions to Saskatchewan correctional centres were Aboriginal (Dauvergne, 2012). As Mary Ellen Turpel-Lafond points out, Indigenous people have been systemically excluded and marginalized within the Canadian justice system (2005). Despite some positive developments over the years (see Turpel-Lafond, 2005), there is an ongoing distrust of justice institutions within Indigenous communities and ongoing failures of dominant justice systems to address deep-seated social injustice and a need for the decolonization of dominant ideas about justice.

In response, three University of Saskatchewan faculty members – Sarah Buhler (Law), Priscilla Settee (Native Studies), and Nancy Van Styvendale (English) – joined forces with Oskayak High School social worker Stan Tu'Inukuafe to develop and implement an interdisciplinary university class which would be located in the community and open to participants from three groups: university students in our three disciplines; mature high school students from Oskayak, an innovative Indigenous secondary school in Saskatoon; and former gang members affiliated with STR8UP, a local gang prevention organization. Our class consisted of the four of us as facilitators, and a total of fourteen students (two each from the disciplines of Law, Native Studies, and English; four from Oskayak; and four from STR8UP). Three of the STR8 UP members in the class were inmates at the Willow Cree Healing Lodge north of Saskatoon: they were permitted to travel with an escort each week to attend the class. The focus of the class was the theme of "justice". For a period of twelve weeks commencing in January 2014, we gathered together to share stories and experiences and to engage with legal and literary texts. The course moved through several larger topics relating to the broader theme of justice: police and policing; the crim-

inal trial process; prisons; restorative justice; and missing and murdered Indigenous women.

Our aim with this class is to make the university more accessible to Indigenous and marginalized youth; to challenge dominant western epistemologies in the university by prioritizing Indigenous knowledge and experience; and to build relationships and solidarity amongst young people who, in the course of their everyday lives, would likely not engage with each other in a meaningful way. In Saskatoon, as in the Prairie Provinces and Canada more generally, ongoing neocolonial practices and entrenched racism separate individuals who come to learn, in large part through their education, that the "other" is to be feared and avoided. By bringing together a mix of students from various social locations—those from "inside" the traditional university environment and those historically excluded from it – our goal was to create a teaching and learning experience that bridged historical and cultural divides between the groups and allowed them to learn from and with each other.

The name of our project – "Wahkohtowin" – richly describes the intent and approach of our class. In the Cree language, the predominant Indigenous language in the Treaty 6 area, the word "wahkohtowin" means family, not necessarily with blood ties, but those with whom we have relationship. In the Cree worldview relationships are a foundational value of Cree being, and a core value of traditional law (see O'Reilly-Scanlon, Crowe, and Weenie 2004; Settee 2013). Elders explain that "all things that were created are related – trees, grass and rocks. We are related to everything" (Native Counselling Services of Alberta, 2009). We become enriched and whole because of our relations with others. Integral to this value is the idea that no one is more important than the other, human, animal or the natural world, and that we are on this earth to help one another. According to Cree law, "[w]hen people come to live together in peace and harmony it is called 'wetaskiwin.' Healthy relationships are the result of following the intent of wahkohtowin and wetaskiwin" (Native Coun-

selling Services of Alberta, 2009). Priscilla Settee's new book *Pimatisiwin* (2013) examines global Indigenous Knowledge Systems and how those systems can work with Indigenous colonized spaces to deconstruct the desperate impact of colonialism. The human values that permeate traditional Indigenous knowledge systems need to be at the centre of our education system, not just for Indigenous communities but for non-Indigenous communities as well. The system is not only failing Indigenous peoples, but it creates a kind of apathy and anomie especially towards our fellow human beings. The Wahkohtowin class embraces a commitment to healthy relationships as justice in action, and aims to enact the restoration of right relations through our pedagogy.

We argue that wahkohtowin-centred pedagogy intervenes, even in a small way, in neo-colonial assumptions about knowledge, power and justice, and is thus a small example of a decolonizing practice. Patricia Monture wrote that it is crucial to understand that colonialism is not a relic of history in Canada, but rather exists as a "living phenomenon…[and as] present-day trajectories of those old relationships" (Monture, 2007, p. 207). Marie Battiste explains colonialism "as a theory of relationships…embedded in power, voice, and legitimacy" (Battiste, 2013, p.106). In Canada, she argues, colonial ideology has "racialized Aboriginal people's identity, marginalized and de-legitimated their knowledge and languages, and exploited their powerlessness in taking their lands" (Battiste, 2013, p. 106-107). Similarly, Elizabeth Comack points out that present-day manifestations of colonialism in Canada include high levels of social exclusion, poverty, and violence in Aboriginal communities, as well as the overrepresentation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system (Comack, 2012, p. 84). Colonialism also manifests through racist discourses which construct Indigenous people as inferior or as the "criminal Other" – people who are in "need of heightened surveillance and control" (Comack, 2012, p. 78).

For Marie Battiste, "decolonization" in the context of education means fighting against the dominant assumptions that

maintain power relations and Eurocentric traditions and assumptions, "disrupting those normalized discourses and singularities and allowing diverse voices and perspectives and objectives into 'mainstream' schooling" (Battiste, 2013, p. 106-107). At its core, decolonization requires resistance to the dominant social order and is about "creating communities, creating spaces in which Aboriginal people are safe to be Aboriginal people" (Comack et al., 2013, p. 146). Our relationship-based pedagogy in the Wahkohtowin classroom embraces and enacts this model of decolonization.

In the first section of this article, we provide some background about how we came together to collaborate on the Wahkohtowin class, which we then describe in detail. We analyze key aspects of the critical pedagogy and methods of the class, including the importance of "Wahkohtowin" to critical understandings of both education and justice. We reflect particularly on the significance of the circle to our pedagogy; the "embodied" nature of learning in the class; and the centrality of personal narratives, both in their own right and as lenses through which to interpret legal and literary texts. We demonstrate how our pedagogy functioned to form a critical counter narrative to dominant understandings of justice and to empower students to seek ways to resist injustice and work across differences in solidarity with one another.

The Importance of Location: Researcher Backgrounds

As scholars who affirm that knowledge is shaped by geographies of self and community, we recognize location as a necessary component of our teaching and scholarly practice. "Location" here refers to the environment or place in which we do our work, as well as our individual subject positions. As Absolon and Willett (2005, p. 97) explain, "Identifying, at the outset, the location from which the voice of the researcher emanates is an Aboriginal way of ensuring that those who study, write, and participate in knowledge creation are accountable." They further emphasize the link between

positionality and relationship building, noting that "research cannot take place without the trust of the community, and one way to gain trust is to locate yourself." The Wahkohtowin project recognizes the importance of location to relationship in multiple ways: first, as the Cree name suggests, we acknowledge that our work is located in Treaty 6 territory and the traditional homelands of the Cree, Metis, Assiniboine, Anishnabe and Dakota peoples. Those of us who are non-Indigenous are guests of the First Peoples of this land. In the classroom, we encourage our students to situate themselves – as members of their respective communities; products of a neocolonial justice system; and rebels within and against this system – and to share these locations with each other as a way of establishing trust across differences. As instructors and researchers, we too position ourselves, counter to the discourse of researcher as objective and teacher as non-partisan, locating our mutual interest in "education as the practice of freedom" (hooks, 1994) in our individual experiences, disciplines, and commitments. We do this not to privilege our location as researchers over our community partners and students, but to provide readers insight into the life experiences and scholarly commitments that inform this pedagogical reflection.

In the mid-1970s, Priscilla Settee, a Cree woman, became active with prisoners' rights groups at the Saskatchewan Penitentiary and later Kingston's infamous Prison for Women (P4W). She was motivated by her work with prison activist Claire Culhane, now deceased, as well as her own personal history: she had (and still has) family serving time in the Saskatchewan Penitentiary. In the late 1990s, Priscilla was part of a team of women from the Native Women's Association of Canada that forced the closure of P4W in response to the suicide deaths of over a dozen Indigenous women and countless human rights abuses within the prison. Priscilla also served as a Councillor and the Chair or Co-Chair of Oskayak High School Parents' Council for fifteen years, from 1997 until 2012. The Wahkohtowin project is a natural progression in her work in that it addresses the ongoing "school to prison pipeline" phenomenon, creates alliances, and raises aware-

ness about Indigenous methods and pedagogies within the university community.

Nancy Van Styvendale is a settler scholar of Indigenous Literatures who is critical of the often solitary and depoliticized nature of literary study. As someone who spent years learning from Indigenous texts, but whose discipline did not encourage engagement with Indigenous communities, Nancy is now committed to community-based literary study. To this end, she teaches community service-learning (CSL) courses that provide students with opportunities to engage with community-based organizations, where they not only "serve" others, but to come to understand how they themselves are "served" through interactions with community. Wahkohtowin builds on this ethic of reciprocity, but disrupts the "charity model" of much service-learning (Marullo and Edwards, 2000; Westheimer and Kahne, 2004) and the figure of the "stranger" that CSL may in fact reify (Himley, 2004). Through Wahkohtowin, Nancy continues to expand her understanding of how education can contribute to cultivating egalitarian relationships.

Sarah Buhler is the descendant of Mennonite farmers who settled in Treaty 6 territory north of Saskatoon in the early twentieth century. Sarah teaches law students engaged in "clinical legal education" – a form of experiential, service-oriented education wherein law students work to promote access to justice for members of marginalized communities. Through her work, Sarah has witnessed the often vast disconnect between law "on the books" and law as it is experienced by the economically and socially marginalized clients of the legal clinic. She is critical of dominant law school pedagogies that tend to focus on a didactic, content-driven approach to teaching and to privilege techno-rational discourses and modes of thinking (Mertz, 2007; Thornton, 1998). As various critical legal scholars have pointed out, the experiences and knowledge of marginalized members of society are rarely reflected in law or legal processes (Gavigan, 2013).

As a team, the three of us are committed to university educa-

tion that contributes to social justice and the development of respectful and equitable relations between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. We are suspicious of elite approaches and understandings of law and justice, and we recognize the disjunction that often exists between academic knowledge and the experiences of those who are profoundly touched by law and legal institutions. In our respective and shared classrooms, we work to disrupt the comfortable assumptions of both our students and ourselves and to make room for experiences and voices that challenge the status quo.

History and Overview of the Wahkohtowin Class

Our collaboration began in September 2012, when we held our first meeting with social worker and long-time STR8UP volunteer Stan Tu'Inukuafe. We began to plan what would in January 2013 become a six-week non-credit class offered to a small group of students from our respective disciplines, students from Oskayak, and members of STR8UP. In our initial community consultation, STR8UP and Oskayak partners advised that it would be best for retention rates and the academic success of their members if we were to work first on developing relationships, rather than rushing headlong into content-focused course delivery. This insight into the educational value of community building resonates with the work of Rebecca Chartrand (2012, p. 152), who notes that Anishinaabe pedagogy is different from "Western curriculum where content and subject matter receive the primary emphasis… Rather, it is learner-centred, subjective, and relies on relational management." For the initial run of the course, we did not begin with an established syllabus, or even an established topic; rather, our goal was to meet the participants and elicit from them the topics and issues in which *they* were interested, and then to construct curriculum based on these interests. Following a collaborative class discussion, the group decided together to focus on four main topics: prisons and the criminal justice system; cultural identity and healing; media representations of race and gender; and the Idle No More movement.

In January 2014, with the assistance of a grant through the Urban Aboriginal Knowledge Network (Prairie Research Centre), we offered the class again, this time for a full 12-week semester.[1] We refined our focus to "justice" and formalized a syllabus focused on five areas: police and policing; the criminal trial; incarceration; restorative justice; and missing and murdered Indigenous women. Each week we gathered in a classroom located off-campus in a community centre called Station 20 West. The location was important: Station 20 West is situated in the heart of the Pleasant Hill neighbourhood, one of the core communities of Saskatoon, and is easily accessible to the majority of STR8UP members and Oskayak students in the class. Our grant permitted us to provide food each week, as well as small honouraria to non-university participants in recognition of the fact that they would not be receiving course credit for their contributions and participation.[2]

As facilitators, we took turns leading the class, which followed roughly the same format each week. We sat in a circle around a large table and commenced with a meal of soup and bannock, followed by an "opening round," where each participant shared something about their past week. Moving to the topic of the day, we conducted a second "round," where each person was asked in turn to speak about their experiences and knowledge of the subject at hand. If the topic was "prisons," for example, students would share their knowledge and direct experience of incarceration, which of course ranged widely. While some participants talked about being in and out of the system for much of their lives, others knew about prisons only through media representations. These initial rounds reinforced the importance of subject position and

1 The Wahkohtowin class was funded as a research project and was granted ethics approval through the University of Saskatchewan Research Ethics Board. After the class was over, we wrote to the participants and asked if they were interested in being interviewed about their experience of the class. The interview results are currently being analyzed and will be published in a subsequent article.

2 Not all the university students in the class received credit for their involvement. We are planning to turn this class into a for-credit university class so that all participants can receive credit towards either a current or future university degree, or towards a high school diploma.

experience to knowledge and validated participants' perspectives. This validation is key, particularly for STR8UP members, many of whom experience systemic racism, classism, and the attendant disrespect on a daily basis. In the second part of each class, we turned to a discussion and examination of a text or other source pertaining to the subject – a legal or literary text, or a film or radio documentary. We worked through critical questions about the text and incorporated aspects of the experiences shared earlier. Following the discussion and reflection, we closed the circle with a final round and "group handshake" – a ritual in which each member of the class went around the circle and shook each person's hands, wishing them well for the coming week.

The first class in January was devoted to introductions, and included an icebreaker activity. We then spent two weeks on the topic of police and policing, discussing first the policing of poverty and homelessness. We read the Saskatoon bylaw that restricts panhandling, as well as an excerpt from a British Columbia case called *City of Victoria v Adams*, which affirms the right of homeless people to shelter. We also addressed the issue of systemic racism within policing through viewing the film *Two Worlds Colliding* (Hubbard). This documentary investigates the infamous "Starlight Tours" – the Saskatoon police practice of dropping individuals off in locations outside of the city in freezing temperatures (see also Comack, 2012; Hubbard & Razack, 2011). We then moved on to the subject of the criminal trial for the next two weeks, again reading both legal and literary texts, such as section 718.2 (d) of the *Criminal Code*, an excerpt from *R v Gladue*, and a passage from Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson's collaborative autobiography *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998). These texts facilitated our understanding of how criminal trials and sentencing practices have contributed to the overrepresentation of Indigenous people in the justice system, but also how the courts have attempted to address the legacy of institutionalized racism through decisions like *Gladue*. Our three week unit on incarceration began by addressing the dehumanization, isolation, and gendered

dimensions of prisons through an excerpt from Jeannette Armstrong's novel *Slash* and Fran Sugar's creative non-fiction piece, "Entrenched Social Catastrophe." We examined human rights in prison, specifically in relation to solitary confinement, by listening together to a radio documentary entitled *Alone Inside* (CBC, 2013), and we explored the impact of gangs in jail and the resources required by those looking to leave the gang life. Next, we turned to the topic of restorative justice, considering traditional forms of Indigenous justice; contemporary "Healing Lodges"; and programs like STR8UP that support healing and trouble the easy distinction between "victim" and "offender." Finally, in recognition of the recent murder of Loretta Saunders and in light of the ongoing call for a national inquiry, students were invited to read an article discussing the case of over 1,100 missing and murdered Aboriginal women in Canada.

We did not formally evaluate the students, in part because we were unable to arrange for course credit to be granted to participants through the university. We encountered numerous institutional barriers in this regard, including creating a cross-disciplinary course open to both undergraduate and law students, and permitting credit for non-university students who would be unable to pay tuition (and also who in many cases did not have high school degrees). For our next planned offering in the winter of 2015, we hope to have in place official course status and credit for our students.

Learning about justice through Wahkohtowin

We turn now to an analysis of several significant aspects of our pedagogy, highlighting the ways in which these approaches illuminate subordinated knowledge about justice and ground profound critiques of dominant narratives about law and justice. Specifically, we look at how our emphasis on the circle creates the conditions for non-hierarchical forms of knowledge creation, and how an "embodied" approach to teaching and learning, in privileging the lived experiences of the subjects of law, animates concepts of justice and

injustice. We then discuss the significance of storytelling as an approach to learning about justice. Finally, we explore the theme of "resistance" to injustice as a way of examining the politicized and politicizing aspects of the Wahkohtowin pedagogy.

The importance of the circle

The circle played a central role in the structure and method of the class and the relationships and knowledge generated through the class. Each week, we sat in a circular formation around a table. This seating arrangement signified and embodied the approach we intended to take to teaching, learning and knowledge. As Métis educator Fyre Jean Graveline points out,

> the energy of the Circle has to do with the physical structure: a Circle has no head and no tail, no beginning and no end. Everyone is equal in a circle, the point of reference is the middle, which is both empty and full of everything. Everyone is equidistance from the middle so there is no sense of hierarchy. (1998, p. 130)

Similarly, Archibald notes that "[t]he image of a circle is used by many First Nations peoples to symbolize wholeness, completeness, and ultimately wellness" (2008, p. 11).

Sitting around the table, university students, members of STR8 UP, Oskayak students, and professors – some currently incarcerated, and others not - faced one another, all equidistant from the centre of the circle. The circle allowed us to move away from a hierarchical model of teaching and learning and towards one based on respect for each person's lived experiences and knowledge. As facilitators, we wanted to make it clear that we did not hold "content" or privileged knowledge, nor that we had the authority to impose our particular "readings of the world" on the group (see Freire, 2007). This approach to the sources and location of knowledge contrasts sharply with dominant "antidialogical" methods of education, where teachers are positioned as

expert transmitters of knowledge and where the experiences of students are routinely silenced (Nylund & Tilsen, 2006). Rather, the pedagogy that flowed from the Wahkohtowin circle was one that recognized that each participant was a valuable "source" of knowledge and critical insight into the phenomena that we discussed.

The circle also functioned to provide the structure for each class. The ritual of the opening "check in," with each student sharing something about his or her life, in turn became a process of creating a shared space in which lived experience and "everyday" events were brought to the circle. This process set the stage for the deeper and more critical discussions that followed by creating a sense that each student came to the circle from their week, whether spent in prison, university or elsewhere, with experiences and stories. It also set the stage for the epistemology the class – as discussed in greater detail below, the central "text" for each class was the experiences of the students in the class. We utilized the structure of the circle frequently during class discussion; multiple rounds of discussion had the effect of bringing a complex and deep wealth of stories and knowledge "to the table". We were then able to critically analyze the legal or literary texts relating to the topic, through the lens of the experiences shared in the circle. The closing ritual also drew on the power of the circle: as described above, each week we closed the class though a "handshake ritual," which had the effect of symbolically and physically connecting the group together and "closing" the circle.

We recognize, and we discussed in the class, the reality that the circle did not in fact transform or change the material conditions of students' lives outside of the class. The students who were inmates at Willow Cree Healing Lodge returned each week to prison and to the routines of carceral life. The university students returned to their other classes, friends and families. The circle did not erase these differences but rather brought them into focus, while at the same time functioning to highlight our common humanity and critique the structures and histories that create the separation and

material inequalities between us. We believe nevertheless that the structure of the circle and the ways in which our conversations unfolded functioned to disrupt and unsettle dominant ideas about knowledge, authority and legitimacy. Certainly, we are aware of the dangers that may exist when privileged students encounter members of subordinated groups in classroom settings such as this one. Scholars such as postcolonial feminist theorist Sara Ahmed have warned of the "fantasy" of proximity and solidarity experienced by well-intentioned Western subjects who seek to work with members of subordinated groups – those perceived as "the Other." Ahmed writes that in many cases this kind of proximity is not a means by which social change occurs, but rather a technique that "allows the reassertion of the agency of the dominant subject" (Ahmed, 2000, p. 124). Similarly, authors such as Gada Mahrouse have studied the ways in which well-intentioned, dominant subjects reassert their sense of benevolence, innocence and redemption through encounters with "the Other" in various solidarity projects and activities (Mahrouse, 2010, p. 181). Although the danger of this pattern is always present, we believe that our Wahkohtowin circle helped to disrupt it also. In the circle, each student's story and voice was given equal space and time, and all of our experiences and stories were subjected to reflection and discussion. We also spoke openly of dominant patterns of racism, exploitation and inequality and the ways that these patterns shaped our current realities. By opening a dialogue in the circle for critical conscientization and discussion, we hoped to challenge and unsettle everyone's perceptions of themselves, their histories, and their understandings of justice even for a brief period of time. In this way, we created a "place to practice the real we want to bring into being" (Smith, 2013, p. 277).

Embodied pedagogy

Feminist theorist bell hooks has described how bodies are "erased" from traditional university classrooms (hooks, 1994, p.192). This "disembodied" approach to pedagogy arises from conventional western epistemologies, which include the idea of a mind-body dualism. Learning is perceived, in this domin-

ant paradigm, as a disembodied intellectual experience. Hooks writes that as a result, individuals tend to enter the typical university classroom to teach and learn as though "only the mind is present, and not the body" (1994, p.193). This approach functions to privilege rational and technical forms of knowledge and devalue knowledge gained from experience, and especially knowledge of members of subordinated groups.

In Saskatchewan the various First Nations reject the concept of a mind-body split, and instead embrace a holistic approach to knowledge and learning (Settee, 2013). This holistic approach reflects many Indigenous views throughout the globe (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999). In response, our Wahkohtowin pedagogy was explicitly "embodied". Our very first gathering began with a smudging ceremony lead by Elder Michael Maurice, which affirmed the centrality of Indigenous knowledge to our collective endeavour and opened things in a good way. Smudging, Chartrand explains, "creates an opportunity for learners to see themselves holistically and to see that, as learners, we each have physical, emotional, mental, and spiritual resources within us that can either support or hinder our learning" (2012, p.155). The process "reminds us to perform our duties for the betterment of humanity" (Settee, 2011, p.438) and that learning happens best "if we bring all aspects of our being into consciousness and cohesion" (Chartrand, 2012, p.155).

Following the smudging, and for each of the following weeks of the class, each session commenced with a meal. Students ate soup or chili and bannock and fruit. Students visited and caught up with each other as they ate. The weekly experience of eating together as a group was a reminder that each student came to the classroom "whole" and not simply as a "disembodied spirit" (hooks, 1994, p.193). Sharing food is a central aspect of Indigenous cultural practice and was an important aspect of our gatherings.

Our core Wahkohtowin pedagogy of storytelling and sharing life stories (described in more detail below) was also a profoundly embodied form of learning. As mentioned

above, many of the participants had intimate experiences as the subjects of policing, the accused in the process of the criminal trial, and as subjects of incarceration. Many participants were personally impacted by the tragic phenomenon of missing and murdered Indigenous women. The stories that these students shared had to do at a profound level with physical embodied experiences of what may be termed "law's violence" (Sarat, 2001; Cover, 1986; Monture-Angus, 1998). For example, students shared about the humiliation of having to wear a "baby doll" smock in prison; of the experience of "social death" engendered by solitary confinement (see also Guenther, 2013); and of being beaten by police. In this way, students' bodies and bodily experiences were sites of injustice and sources of knowledge about injustice. For the students who did not have direct physical experiences with police, courts or prisons, we were able to observe how the bodies of certain individuals are exempted to a much greater degree from "law's violence" – often based on privileged race or educational status. That is, we were reminded that suffering and violence are not distributed equally but rather are distributed along lines of inequality (see Farmer, 2005). Whereas law and justice are often conceptualized as abstract notions, this approach to pedagogy highlighted an understanding of the violence that law can do to human beings, through policing and the practices of legal institutions.

The "handshake" ritual that we incorporated each week was also significant as a physical reminder of our interconnectedness, as well as in its stark reminder of the ways in which touch is absent within conventional classrooms. By eating together, shaking hands each week, and sharing stories, many of which involved stories about violence being done on bodies, we connected bodies and minds together, and underscored the centrality of embodied experience as source of knowledge about justice and injustice.

Stories as core texts

Cherokee novelist Thomas King has famously written, "The

truth about stories is that that's all we are" (2003, p. 2). For Indigenous peoples in particular, stories are the foundation of teaching, learning, and being; they carry and pass down history, politics, culture, and law, connecting people across and within generations. "Stories," Settee elaborates, "have taught Indigenous peoples how to conduct themselves in a good way for the good of the community.… [T]hese stories, and many others yet unheard, rich sources of Indigenous knowledge, must transform the academy" (2011, p. 436). We acknowledge the colonial legacy of silencing, assimilation, and appropriation of voice that continues to shape the university, and we participate in transformation – of the academy and ourselves – by respecting the stories told in the Wahkohtowin classroom as sites of individual and collective knowledge.

Students' stories formed the core course "texts." While we brought in a variety of legal and literary materials, these were always discussed in relation to the real life experiences and narratives of our participants. For example, an older student who went to residential school as a child and then spent the rest of his life in and out of jail told us many powerful stories that illustrated the long-term effects of the schools and the continuing institutionalization of Aboriginal peoples via the prison system. Such stories provided us with painful evidence of the impact of colonial law on Indigenous peoples. They powerfully underscored the observation of Patricia Monture-Angus that for Indigenous people, "[o]ur understanding of law is not represented within the Canadian legal system. We experience that system, particularly the criminal justice system, as racist and oppressive" (1998, p.34). Personal stories thus animate law and its effects. According to Kim Anderson, learning is best located in stories about experience. She suggests that "we can understand colonization better if we ask, 'What does it mean in our daily lives?'" (2004, p. 125; see also Chartrand, 2012).

While stories about experience enrich our understanding of texts, texts enrich our understanding of our own and others'

experiences. Reading case law, itself a kind of story, was an integral part of our approach. In one class on the criminal trial, we read excerpts of the Supreme Court of Canada's decision, *R. v. Gladue*, which affirms that judges must take into account the "unique systemic or background factors" of Aboriginal people at sentencing (1999). STR8UP members discussed their own experiences in court, noting that the provisions guaranteed by *Gladue* were not used in their experience; indeed, in many cases, defendants were not even made aware that these provisions existed. Given the inaccessibility of the law for many members of marginalized communities, reading actual legal texts is empowering. Students were able to "put their hands" on texts that often seem remote and unintelligible, yet which have so much power over their daily lives. In this way, they were invited to denaturalize the law and understand it as a social construction with inherent bias – as opposed to an inevitable reality. Through "close reading" of legal language, we deciphered law's audience: who it is written to protect, and who it disregards.

Literary texts, both autobiographical and fictional, also provide insights into experience. Students may see themselves reflected in these texts, and thus have their experiences with the criminal justice system recognized and affirmed, or they may learn more deeply about the experiences of others, further developing empathy and solidarity. In Jeanette Armstrong's *Slash* (1990), the protagonist describes the experience of incarceration as akin to death, using the image of teaming maggots in his gut to describe how he feels. Metaphors such as this convey a rich and visceral truth about the effects of incarceration. Fran Sugar's creative non-fiction essay "Entrenched Social Catastrophe" (1989) provides another example of the affective force of literary representation. In the essay, Sugar presents a fictional profile of a female Aboriginal inmate, whom she calls "Ms. Cree," to emphasize the ways in which prisons strip people of their individuality. At the same time, the moniker suggests that Indigenous peoples do in fact have common experiences of the justice system, but that they manage to maintain their distinct identities (here, as Cree)

even in coercive contexts.

Finally, in addition to reflecting experience, literary texts invite us to imagine the world differently, outside the confines the status quo, be it in the courtroom, the prison, or elsewhere. In their collaborative autobiography *Stolen Life: The Journey of a Cree Woman* (1998), celebrated author Rudy Wiebe and Yvonne Johnson, a relative of the Cree Chief Big Bear, piece together the traumatic circumstances that led to Yvonne's conviction for first degree murder, linking the injustice she suffered with that of Big Bear, who ultimately died in prison. The book raises questions around appropriation of voice and the ethics of collaboration, particularly between a white man in a position of power and an Indigenous woman in prison, but it remains important for a number of reasons, not least of all for its presentation of Yvonne's defense, the one she was not allowed to provide during her trial. In this way, it points to the limitations of the trial, highlighting who gets to speak and who is silenced; it provides an alternate hearing (Rymhs, 2008). In this sense, and in the way that it models relationship building across cultural difference and healing through collaborative storytelling, it is an example of how literature bears witness to marginalized realities and imagines a world transformed by listening and storytelling.

Justice, injustice and resistance

The theme of our class was "justice". Because of Canada's colonial history justice is an issue that affects Indigenous peoples in almost all aspects of their daily lives. In many ways, the stories that formed the core "texts" of our class were stories not of justice, but of profound *injustice*. They were not stories of fairness, equality, humaneness, or compassion—not stories of restoring broken relationships or looking at the root causes of crime. Instead, they illustrated the inequality, dehumanization, racism, and continued destruction of relationships, both within and between peoples, forged in the neocolonial state. They were stories about punishment, retribution, and penal warehousing that masquerade as "rehabili-

tation." They were stories about the separation of fathers from families, and children from parents and grandparents; they were stories about brothers being removed from and thus unable to protect their sisters, and sisters who are missing or murdered. Justice for this project has involved identifying some of the structural inequalities in education, employment, and incarceration that exist between Indigenous peoples and other Canadians, and it has entailed looking at the roles and responsibilities of ordinary citizens, including students, in remedying these inequalities.

Participants' stories and the group's critical reflection served to bring to the fore the dissonance between dominant justice system narratives of equality, fairness and impartiality and the ways in which this very system reproduces inequality, oppression and neocolonial ideologies. It became clear that "injustice" is not an abstract concept, but rather that as a result of neocolonialism and continuing unequal power relations, it is produced through institutional and interpersonal practices, and that it has concrete and often physically painful effects. For example, we learned that the law permitting "administrative segregation" or solitary confinement in federal prisons can be utilized in specific and violent ways in order to dehumanize inmates, who are already "othered" through colonial and racist ideologies (see Guenther, 2013). By hearing stories of participants who had experienced solitary confinement, and then reading the legislative sections about solitary confinement through the lens of these stories, it became clear that the legislation, despite its neutral, administrative tone, authorizes violence towards individual bodies. Similarly, our discussion about missing and murdered Indigenous women revolved around particular women – family members and loved ones of class members – and individual Indigenous women in the class described their own embodied fears about potential violence. In other words, our pedagogy eschewed abstracted definitions and understandings, grounding our learning about justice in stories and critical "readings" of experiences.

The deep and often painful stories of injustice that were shared were accompanied by many other stories that demonstrated ongoing resistance to injustice and dehumanization and the cultivation of justice within families and communities. For example, we discussed restorative justice initiatives such as CoSA (Circles of Support and Accountability), an organization that helps reintegrate "high risk sex offenders" through community-based support. Restorative justice, we learned from a guest speaker whose son was permanently injured in an act of random violence, is a process through which "victim" and "perpetrator" engage in a process of reconciliation, often through meeting and conversation. "Healing relationships, as opposed to balancing hurt with hurt, is one core value of restorative justice," John Braithwaite contends (2000, p. 186). This form of justice can also attempt to problematize any easy definition of "perpetrator," looking to how so-called "offenders" have themselves been victims – for example, of the crime of the residential schools or the 60s Scoop. We also discussed the cultural plurality of justice (see Ross, 2006) and the right of Indigenous peoples to determine and practice their own traditions of justice, in contrast to the "univocal … justice of extant Western systems," which has a totalizing effect (Braithwaite, 2000, p. 187). We further learned how demands for justice can be represented and created through art, as can be seen in the *Walking With Our Sisters* art installation, which responded to the phenomenon of missing and murdered Indigenous women by calling on hundreds of people from across the country to bead moccasin vamps (the tops of moccasins) for display. And we explored the idea of justice as it is lived out daily in the healing journeys of former gang members involved with STR8 UP, who "give back" to their communities through gang prevention work and embrace a holistic model of being that informs their relationships. Through our discussions of these and other examples, just as the concept of "injustice" became concretized and particularized during the course of the term, an idea of "justice" began to take shape. This was evidenced particularly towards the end of the project when most mem-

bers stated they would like to see the project continue, that it was too brief and that they wished all education experiences could be this way. This vision of justice was characterized by resistance, relationship, and solidarity.

Through our discussions, we learned that to be Indigenous is to resist destructive colonial influences, and to be an ally of Indigenous peoples is to do the same. To resist is to create understanding, develop solidarities and alliances, and create community among fellow human beings. To resist is to develop strategies with like-minded allies in order to seek solutions and not stand alone. In many ways, the Wahkohtowin project represents resistance, as it builds on pedagogies of hope and shares ways of knowing that begin with the principles of Cree values wahkohtowin, miyo wichitowin ("having good relations"), and others. It takes university space, teaching and learning, challenging narrow learning structures and builds new fluid and organic ones. In significant ways, it became clear to us as the class progressed that by creating space for the sharing of stories and critical readings of dominant narratives about justice, we were engaging in an act of resistance to mainstream discourses, challenging domination and abuse, and choosing to build alliances and alternate visions of justice. Fife (1993, p. *i*) describes the ways that stories of the previously silenced "carry their own life, having been birthed through the voice of Indigenous [people] who have chosen to re-invent how we resist, how we refuse to be silenced, and how we use contemporary tools to express old beliefs in order to lay the seeds for future generations."

As the term progressed, Wahkohtowin participants began to talk about ways that they could act in a concrete way on the critical "readings" of the world that were emerging in the class. Moving beyond dissent to examine possible solutions is a central goal of the Wahkohtowin project. One of the class members, a member of STR8 UP who is an inmate at the Willow Cree Healing Lodge, expressed that the men at the Healing Lodge were seeking sports equipment for their health and wellness program, for which they were respon-

sible for fundraising. He proposed that the group hold a fundraiser, which we ended up doing as part of a larger event organized by law students on the topic of solitary confinement. Men from Willow Cree provided art for an art auction, and members of STR8 UP spoke at the forum about their experiences of solitary confinement. Funds were raised for the health and wellness committee and a greater understanding of the issue of solitary confinement was promoted in the university community as a result of the event. The fundraiser in many ways felt like a natural extension of the class itself: it was a small act of solidarity, resistance and the spirit of Wahkohtowin. It demonstrated a particular, concrete and relational approach to justice and a desire for healing. In this way, the Wahkohtowin class embodied hooks' notion of a "space for intervention", where students are able to become critical thinkers who can analyze and work to change reality beyond the classroom (1994, p. 129; 137). It also demonstrates the powerful potential of an emphasis on wahkohtowin – relationship – as a foundation for the awakening of political, social and cultural consciousness.

Conclusions

A small team of people with a rich working history within the educational and criminal justice systems recognized that the education system could be enhanced to create a more critical and egalitarian model – one built on Indigenous methods and critical approaches to dominant narratives about justice and power. Indeed, our class itself was in many ways a model of justice: the building of marginalized youth, the conscientization of students with relative privilege, and the transformation of educational practices and materials are part of the slow and steady work of our resistance and collective decolonization. The Wahkohtowin project examines traditional methodologies of teaching and learning, and redesigns one that utilizes the knowledge of both learners and teachers. Wahkohtowin builds on the strengths of traditional Indigenous concepts, such as developing familial relationships and learning/teaching opportunities of equal-

ity and empathy, to create a more compassionate educational environment. The project also focuses on resistance, responsibility and solidarity. It has mobilized mainstream learners to create an ethic of responsibility, to question the comfortable status quo, to speak out, and to use positions of privilege for social change. It has encouraged previously marginalized individuals to expect that learning can be a critical and respectful matter, that they can contribute to the teaching experience, and that their knowledge counts. Through the Wahkohtowin class we desire our teaching and research as Indigenous and allied scholars to drive the educational experience to help heal abuse, pain, and community breakdown because they are a fundamental impediment to our ability to develop as individuals, communities and nations. The deconstruction and reconstruction can and should be a collective academic undertaking and part of the role of knowledge creation. Ultimately, the vision is one that is deeply political, cultural and transformative. Like Hartsock (1998), we believe that the role of knowledge creation must take a central role in deconstructing the situation of the oppressed: "the understanding of the oppressed exposes the real relations among people as inhumane" (p. 241). Our team believes that the Wahkohtowin project models a new vision and hope for the future.

References

Absolon, K., & Willett, C. (2005). Putting ourselves forward: Location in Aboriginal research. In L. Brown & S. Strega (Eds.), *Research as resistance: Critical, indigenous, and anti-oppressive approaches* (97-126). Toronto, ON: Scholar's Press.

Ahmed, Sara. (2000). *Strange Encounters: Embodied Others in Post-Coloniality*. London: Routledge

Anderson, K. (2004). Speaking from the heart: Everyday storytelling and adult learning. *Canadian Journal of Native Education,* 28(1), 123-129.

Archibald, J. (2008). Indigenous storywork: Educating the heart, mind, body, and spirit. Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press.

Armstrong, J. (1990). Slash. Penticton, BC: Theytus Books.

Battiste, M. (2013). Decolonizing Education: Nourishing the Learning Spirit. Saskatoon: Purich Publishing.

Battiste, M. (2000). Maintaining Aboriginal identity, language and culture in modern society. In M. Battiste (Ed.), Reclaiming Indigenous voice and vision (192-208). Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press.

Battiste, M., Bell, L., & Findlay, L.M. (2002). Decolonizing education in Canadian universities: An interdisciplinary, international, Indigenous research project. Canadian Journal of Native Education, 26(2), 82-95.

Braithwaite, John. (2000). Restorative justice and social justice. Saskatchewan Law Review 63 (1), 185-194.

Story, B. (Reporter). (2014, January 17). Alone Inside [Radio broadcast episode]. In Ideas with Paul Kennedy. Toronto, ON: Canadian Broadcasting Corporation.

Castellano, M.B., Davis, L., & Lahache, L. (Eds.). (2000). Aboriginal education: Fulfilling the promise. Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press.

Chartrand, R. (2012). Anishinaabe pedagogy. Canadian Journal of Native Education, 35(1), 144-162.

Comack, E., Deane, L et al. (2013). "Indians wear red": Colonialism, resistance, and Aboriginal street gangs. Blackpoint, NS: Fernwood Press.

Comack, E. (2012). Racialized policing: Aboriginal people's encounters with the police. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.

Cover, R. (1986). Violence and the word. Yale Law Journal, 95(1), 1601-1629.

Dauvergne, M. (2012). Adult correctional statistics in Canada, 2010/2011 (Catalogue number 85-002-X). Ottawa, ON: Statistics Canada.

Duran, E., & Duran, B. (1995). Native American postcolonial psychology. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Farmer, P. (2005). Pathologies of power: Health, human rights, and the new war on the poor. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.

Fife, C. (ed.) (1993). *The colour of resistance: A contemporary collection of writing by Aboriginal women.* Toronto, ON: Sister Vision.

Freire, P. (2007). *Pedagogy of hope*. (R.R. Barr, Trans.). New York, NY: Continuum.

Gavigan, S.M. (2012). *Hunger, horses and government men: Criminal law on the Aboriginal plains, 1870-1905*. Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press.

Giroux, H.A. (1983). *Theory and resistance in education: A pedagogy for the opposition*. South Hadley, MA: Bergin & Garvey Publishers, Inc.

Gramsci, A. (1971). *Selections from the prison notebooks*. New York: International Publishers.

Graveline, F.J. (1998). *Circle works: Transforming Eurocentric consciousness*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.

Guenther, L. (2013). *Solitary confinement: Social death and its afterlives*. Minneapolis, MN. University of Minnesota Press.

Hartsock, N. (1998). *The feminist standpoint revisited, and other essays*. Boulder, CA: Westview Press.

Himley, M. (2004). Facing (up to) 'the stranger' in community service-learning. *College Composition and Communication*, 55(3), 416-438.

Hooks, B. (1984). *Feminist theory: From margin to center.* Cambridge, MA: South End Press.

Hooks, B. (1994). *Teaching to transgress: Education as the practice of freedom*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Hooks, B. (2003). *Teaching community: A pedagogy of hope*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Hubbard, T. (Director). (2004). *Two worlds colliding* [Motion Picture]. Canada: National Film Board of Canada.

Hubbard, T., & Razack, S. (2011). Reframing "Two worlds colliding": A conversation between Tasha Hubbard and Sherene Razack. *Review of Education, Pedagogy and Cultural Studies*, 33(4), 318-332.

King, T. (2003). *The truth about stories*: *A native narrative*. Toronto, ON: House of Anansi Press.

Mahrouse, G. (2010). Questioning Efforts that seek to "do good": Insights from transnational solidarity activism and socially responsible tourism. In S. Razack, M. Smith & S. Thobani (Eds.), *States of race: Critical race feminism for the 21st century*. (192-208). Toronto: Between the Lines.

Marcuse, H. (1972). *Counterrevolution and revolt*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.

Marullo, S., & Edwards, B. (2000). From charity to justice: The potential of university-community collaboration for social change. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 43, 895-912.

Mertz, E. (2007). *The language of law school: Learning to 'think like a lawyer'*. Oxford, England: Oxford University Press.

Milloy, J. (2008). Indian Act colonialism: A century of dishonour, 1869-1969. N.p.: National Centre for First Nations Governance.

Monture, P. (2007). Racing and erasing: law and gender in white settler societies. In S. Hier amd S. Bolaria (Eds.), *Race and racism in 21st century Canada.* (197-216). Peterborough: Broadview Press.

Monture-Angus, P. (1995). *Thunder in my soul: A Mohawk woman speaks*. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Press.

Native Counselling Services of Alberta (Producer). (2009). *Wahkohtowin: The relationship between Cree people and natural law* [Motion picture]. Canada: BearPaw Media Productions.

Nylund, D., & Tilsen, J. (2006). Pedagogy and praxis: Postmodern spirit in the classroom. *Journal of Systemic Therapies,* 25(4), 21-31.

O'Reilly-Scanlon, K., Crowe, C., & Weenie, A. (2004). Pathways to understanding: 'Wahkohtowin' as a research methodology. *McGill Journal of Education,* 39(1), 29-44.

Ross, Rupert. (2006). *Dancing with a ghost: Exploring Indian reality*. Penguin Canada.

Rymhs, Deena. (2008). *From the iron house: Imprisonment in First Nations writing*. Waterloo, ON: Wilfred Laurier University Press.

Sarat, A. (Ed.). (2001). *Law, violence, and the possibility of justice.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Silver, J. (2006). In their own voices: Building urban Aboriginal communities. Halifax, NS: Fernwood Publishing.

Settee, P. (2011). Indigenous knowledge: Multiple approaches. In G. Dei (Ed.), *Indigenous philosophies and critical education: A reader* (434-450). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.

Settee, P. (2011). Learning from the indigenous global south. In G. Dei (Ed.), *International handbook/reader on indigenous philosophies and critical education* (434-450). New York, NY: Peter Lang Publishing.

Settee, P. (2013). *Pimatisiwin: The good life, global Indigenous knowledge systems*. Vernon, B.C.: JCharlton Publishing.

Smith, A. (2013). Unsettling the privilege of self-reflexivity. in F. Winddance Twine & B. Gardener (Eds.), *Geographies of privilege* (263-279*).* New York: Routledge.

Battiste, M. (2000). Maintaining Aboriginal identity, language and culture in modern society. In M. Battiste (Ed.), *Reclaiming Indigenous voice and vision* (192-208). Vancouver, BC: University of British Columbia Press

St. Denis, V. (2007). Aboriginal education and anti-racist education: Building alliances across cultural and racial identity. *Canadian Journal of Education*, 30(4), (1068-1092).

Sugar, F. (1989). Entrenched social catastrophe: Native women in prison. *Canadian Woman Studies,* 10(2), 87-89.

Thornton, M. (1998). Technocentrism in the law school: Why the gender and colour of law remain the same. *Osgoode Hall Law Journal*, 36(2), 369-398.

Tuhiwai Smith, L. (2008). *Decolonizing methodologies: Research and Indigenous peoples*. London, England: Zed Books.

Turpel-Lafond, M. (2005). Some thoughts on inclusion and innovation in the Saskatchewan justice system. *Saskatchewan Law Review.* 68(2), 293-302.

Westheimer, J. and Kahne, J. (2004). Educating the 'good' citizen: political choices and pedagogical goals. *PS Online*, 241-247.

Wiebe, R. and Johnson, Y. (1998). *Stolen life: The journey of a Cree woman*. Toronto, ON: A.A. Knopf Canada.