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Encountering Difficult Knowledge through holistic practices: Disrupting 9/11 orthodox accounts in social studies classrooms

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Zahra Kasamali

I am a pre-service teacher educator, and researcher at the University of Alberta, in Edmonton, Alberta, which is located on Treaty 6 traditional territory. I am also a senior high social studies and English language arts teacher by profession. I am committed to exploring and enacting deepened understandings of difference alongside pre-service teachers in ways that support the balance and well-being of young people on curricular and pedagogical landscapes. My professional development efforts have been focused on reconnecting with the wisdom of sacred ecology, as inspired by Cree wisdom philosophies and Qur'anic philosophies, as espoused by Rumi's poetry. These learnings continue to guide how embodied knowledges can be recovered and attended to meaningfully on schooling sites. I am a proud aunty to two little ones, and a kitten mom. I enjoy regular fitness, and baking healthy treats in my spare time.

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INTRODUCTION

Difficult Knowledge and the Curricular and Pedagogical Significance of Holism

This article explores how secondary school teachers can facilitate provocative and meaningful encounters with "difficult knowledge" (Garrett, 2017; Kumashiro, 2015) through learning from non-orthodox accounts of the 9/11 event (Kasamali, 2012, 2015). Garrett (2017)

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describes difficult knowledge as "an orientation toward learning about the tumultuousness of society, recognizes the tumultuousness of our orientations to it, and further takes uncertainty as a central feature of the learning encounter" (p. 19). Difficult knowledge is an encounter toward that which is uncomfortable, appears far away but in reality is very near, and could invite feelings of guilt, betrayal, uncertainty, and sadness.

The necessity to approach difficult knowledge with traumatic historical events, such as 9/11, will be supported with findings from my doctoral research Reconsidering Difference: The Curricular and Pedagogical Significance of Holism. My doctoral research examined how difference, with regards to multiple perspectives, identity categories, and contrasting ways of knowing and being are often approached with an unnamed desire to promote sameness. The notion of "infusing" and "incorporating" (Donald, 2013) multiple perspectives in order to achieve the goals of Alberta's Teaching Quality Standards related to inclusion (2018) contributes to the assimilation of difference and flattens lived experience.

THE RESEARCH

My research was inspired by what was missing from my own K-12 education and the tensions I have experienced throughout my career as a social studies and English language arts teacher. I situate myself as a Pakistani-Canadian, and Muslim woman who has been deeply inspired by the traditions and spiritual practices of Sufism[1]. Much of my K-12 schooling trajectory was plagued by experiences of frustration, sadness, and anxiety in response to how the hidden curriculum, through the presentation of curricular outcomes, grand narratives (Stanley, 2006) in textbooks, determined who I was supposed to be. I often felt as though I could only identify myself in singular ways so as to appease and placate my teachers' discomfort with difference. I experienced much imbalance in myself as a result. These traumas were amplified following 9/11 when I was a high school student. I was blindsided by the fact that none of my teachers spent any time addressing this tragic event in their classrooms.

FINDINGS AND IMPLICATIONS

My doctoral research investigated the curricular and pedagogical significance of holism in deepening understandings of difference. I understand holism as seeking a balance between the mental, emotional, spiritual, and physical parts of oneself and learning from the guidance of sacred ecology. Holism also entails living in ways that honour embodied knowledges and inner knowings. I worked alongside four former Aboriginal Studies 30[2] students as part of my research program. Aboriginal Studies was the best example of a curricular pedagogical context in Alberta that I could find that sought to balance intellectual and embodied

[1] Sufism is an umbrella term referring to different practices in Islam that seek to balance the material and spiritual aspects of life and living and is deeply guided by esoteric or the inner meanings of the Qur'an.

[2] Aboriginal Studies 30 is a provincially recognized course in Alberta. Please note that although the terminology has shifted from Aboriginal to Indigenous in contemporary parlance, the program was developed in 2002, and its name has not as yet been updated.

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knowledges. The course was guided by and through sacred ecological wisdom teachings and offered countless opportunities for youth to reconnect with their inner selves, nature, their peers, and to learn from traditional Indigenous knowledges through the guidance of Elders. Student participants engaged in a series of four activities that helped them to revisit key learnings from the course. Students noted that having opportunities to partake in three activities: sharing circles, outdoors activities, and learning from Elders, shifted curricular priorities away from the typical "head space" enactments of curricular goals. The students also revealed how emotive approaches that pulled at their heartstrings guided them to find meaning and care for others whose lived experiences they did not share in. Student participants also noted the importance of deep listening with regards to learning from difficult knowledge, and experienced healing from experiences of colonial exclusions through the energy that flowed within their sharing circles. Opportunities to face each other, express deep emotions within, and learn from lived experiences, also highlighted the importance the held for prioritizing healing in relation to difficult knowledge encounters.

The insights I gleaned from former students' experiences with Aboriginal Studies 30, grounded and centered in holism, reveal for me that holistic insights can help to reposition how young people participate in difficult conversations on difference. Their experiences illuminate the transformative and generative potential of difference that can inspire deepened expressions of connectivity and belonging that are not beholden to frameworks of identity such as citizenship, and nationality, which are prioritized in curricular outcomes. Reconnecting with embodied knowledges and shared sacred ecological roots may inspire more balanced ways to live and relate with each other.

PRACTICAL GUIDANCE FOR TEACHERS

I have found that beginning the teaching term with sharing circles as a practice we will use throughout the school year is an ethical and respectful way to establish relationships of trust with students. I often share my experiences of relating with myself, nature, and others more deeply during my time in circle with Elder Bob Cardinal and my peers. It has been important for me to address my own experience in circle as there are many ways in which circle philosophies continue to be honoured. I also share a beautiful story from Rumi entitled The Boatman and share Brene Brown's Ted Talk "The Power of Vulnerability" (Brown, 2011) . The Boatman evinces the struggles we all experience when we presume to know all that there is about life and living, and highlights the pitfalls of relying on formal knowledge alone.

Brené Brown's powerful Ted Talk addresses how feelings of shame and guilt interfere with building healthy relationships with oneself and others. Her talk conveys that running away from one's true feelings perpetuates pain, and that learning to live with openness and vulnerability can inspire meaningful and sustainable connections. Many students have commented on their propensity to deny their own feelings and how this perpetuates further pain and imbalance.

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This initial work sets the stage to more openly and meaningfully engage with difficult truths that can at times lead us to question our identities and who we are. Students are also asked at the beginning of the term to draw their identities on large sheets of sketch paper. I offer prompts such as what gives them joy in their lives, and what aspects of their daily living makes them who they are. I also ensure that they have a variety of markers, crayons, pastels, and paints to honour their process. Once these images are completed, we share them as a class. I later hang these drawings on our classroom wall and encourage students to think about how their drawings may change throughout the course of our time together since identity is fluid. This activity has also provided me with countless opportunities to situate myself alongside my students as a Pakistani-Canadian Muslim woman and interweave my lived experiences as part of my teaching practices. When students see me doing this, they become more comfortable sharing their own lives and can better see that history education is not fossilized in time.

Such individual and collective work sets the stage to begin introducing meaningful encounters that directly implicate students (denHeyer, 2009). When introducing the 9/11 event in a Social 10-1 class for example, I have made connections to Related Issue 2: Legacies of Historical Globalization in Canada. I offer a throughline question[3] to the class which asks "to what extent do orthodox 9/11 narratives reinforce notions of an imagined Canadian identity through the official policy of multiculturalism?". I begin by leading my students through an exploration of the history surrounding the introduction of Canada's multicultural policy under Prime Minister Pierre Trudeau, then juxtapose this with the current intentions for multiculturalism under the guidance of Prime Minister Justin Trudeau.

I then arrange students in groups of four to explain their personal views, perceptions and experiences of media and historical portrayals of multiculturalism. These group discussions are later opened up to a whole class discussion. Typically, students voice conflicting perceptions of, and experiences with, multiculturalism. I then ask students to read (in their groups) two newspaper articles with conflicting views of multiculturalism (Ansari, 2017; Hrushetska, 2013; Paris, 2018; Woodside, 2009). I ensure that one article is taken from a Canadian context and that the other is from an international source such as Al-Jazeera. These articles share the position that Canada is either too multicultural or not multicultural enough. The next connected lesson involves our class revisiting our dissonant perceptions of multiculturalism and our encounters with different perceptions of Canadianness. I ask students to anonymously share whether or not they feel singular notions of Canadian identity exist, if there is such a thing as Canadian identity, and what constitutes Canadian identity? These responses are collected on sticky notes and posted on the white board. I then read these responses aloud. Again, contrasting responses are often shared; they reveal that Canadian identity is often associated with moral signifiers as "better than" and "kinder than" our neighbours down south, and "tolerant" of others.

[3] Throughline questions help students explore and address the content of the course. Throughline questions, unlike themes, offer an invitation for students to encounter and learn from open ended questions (denHeyer, 2005). It is important to note that Throughline questions differ from essential questions.

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Next, students are prompted to participate individually in a five-minute inkshedding[4] response in their Google Classrooms regarding what they know about 9/11. They are guided to share their story of narratives they have acquired about 9/11 through direct and indirect media representations and pop culture. These responses are then initially shared in pairs and brought forth for class discussion. Following these discussions, I share the film entitled 11'09"01,: September 11 (Makhmalbaf et al., 2002) which offers 11 representations from the perspective of the event from 11 different countries. Each episode is 11 minutes long. I share one episode per class and invite students to partake in journal response entries to each class outlining their experiences with each episode and the extent to which these stories align or contest their own accounts of 9/11. Upon the final day of viewing all 11 films are viewed once again and the class unites in a sharing circle to unpack their experiences with these films. Students are then asked to revisit their own accounts and are again prompted to think about what was left out and why? These learnings are built upon throughout the term as we consult primary and secondary sources that disrupt and interrupt simplistic 9/11 narratives. In doing so, students, alongside their teachers, begin to uncover the fallacies inherent in simplistic narrative accounts.

Q & A WITH ZAHRA KASAMALI

Question #1

Teacher's Question

What does the grand narrative or simplified narrative of 9/11 specifically refer to?

Zahra Kasamali's Response

The grand, or simplified, narrative of 9/11 refers to the story of 9/11 as an attack on American values, freedom, and liberal ideologies that was supposedly supported by interests of the so-called Axis of Evil. An example of such accounts can be acquired from interviews with President George Bush Jr.

Although students in K-12 contexts who are learning from these narratives were not alive at the time of 9/11, it is not overly assumptive to suggest that they would have been exposed to essentialized portrayals of Islam and Muslims via media and pop culture. In other words, students may unknowingly have an "imagined Muslim" in mind.

Thinking about the experiences of Muslim youth born post 9-11 also brings forth another instance in which many Muslim youth have been continuously bombarded with essentialized representations of who they are as a result of 9/11.

[4] Inkshedding is a writing process that invites participants to freely write for a maximum of 10 minutes. Inkshedding is not concerned with grammar, punctuation or format, but instead seeks to get ideas on paper.The goal of such writing is to encourage equal and open expression. Prompts are often provided to help guide the process.

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Question #2

Teacher's Question

How can I facilitate the identity drawing activity?

Zahra Kasamali's Response

I have intentionally facilitated this activity as very fluid in nature. I spend time demystifying the drawing process with students since this tends to evoke much anxiety in students. I am sure to emphasize that this activity is not assessed according to artistic merit. I also emphasize that much of the time in the classroom is spent on textual learning, so the process of drawing can also invite deepened reflections and insights. To help students through this process, I show examples of artwork that aesthetically represent who I am and how I have changed over the years.

The following prompts may be helpful in facilitating this activity:

- What makes you who you are?
- What brings you joy in your life?
- How do you see your identity at this moment in your life?
- What activities, hobbies, practices, and relationships support balance and well-being for you?

Students have created drawings that include popularized notions of Canadian identity such as hockey and Tim Hortons. Others have dug deeper and included how they connect with nature, learnings from family, faith, spirituality, and events that have changed their lives.

Question #3

Teacher's Question

What are some examples of helpful inkshedding resources that I can use with my students? What are sample prompts that I can use?

Zahra Kasamali's Response

The University of Calgary provides access to an inkshedding workshop, run by Doug Brent (n.d.). His PowerPoint presentation offers a description of the process and how it differs from the more familiar freewriting strategy. Writealaska also offers a brief set of instructions that can support you in your efforts to use this strategy and highlights a way of making sense of the fluid process.

With regards to sample prompts, I try to encourage open ended questions as much as possible so as not to steer the course for students. This is intentional to help promote personal inquiry that is not beholden to overly linear approaches. A few examples of prompts that I have used are:

- What images come to mind when you hear the date September 11, 2001?
- Does identity change or stay the same?

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• Is how we see ourselves individually and collectively dependent on the actions of other peoples and nations?

Question #4

Teacher's Question

What does sacred ecology refer to? Are there helpful resources to expand on this concept?

Zahra Kasamali's Response

Sacred ecology refers to the entities that make life possible (i.e., the sun, water, wind, earth, etc). Sacred ecology reminds that human beings and our more-than-human relational network (the four leggeds and crawlers, for example) are interconnected and dependent upon each other for survival. A helpful way to think about this is to explore how sacred ecology connects to Indigenous perspectives in the Alberta Programme of Studies, and specifically, what it means to be a Treaty person.

Harold Cardinal and Walter Hildebrandt's (2000) book *Treaty elders of Saskatchewan: Our dream is that our peoples will one day be clearly recognized as nations* is both enlightening and accessible. They carefully unpack what is meant by sacred ecology by explaining the original Spirit and Intent of Treaty by foregrounding Indigenous Elder knowledges and experiences. This book also offers much context pertaining to Indigenous conceptions of the land, living together in harmonious ways, and the sacred nature of Treaties.

Question #5

Teacher's Question

What is an example of sharing circle protocol that I can use in my classroom?

Zahra Kasamali's Response

Alberta Education offers fantastic resources that articulate sharing or talking circle protocol and examples. It is important to note that sharing/talking circles that are conducted in classrooms are different from ceremonial circles which are supported by Elders. As a non-Indigenous person who continues to work towards allyship with Indigenous communities, I share my experiences of partaking in circle over the last 8 years. I also underscore that all individuals are equal in the circle; we are different but simultaneously related. I convey that when an individual is holding the talking stick, that means that we have our respect and attention directed to that person without interrupting. Further, I emphasize that there is no compulsion to participate in circle, and that we can share as much or as little as we want. Lastly, I am careful to make sure that a connection to Indigenous worldviews is attended to prior to my first practice of circle with students. This context is essential to ensure that we are ethically coming alongside Indigenous ways of knowing and being. A few suggestions I have include Alberta Education's (2021) Talking Circle Fact Sheet and sample, which offers a basic fact sheet addressing how a sharing circle can be facilitated in one's classroom. The

sample includes lesson activities that connect the intent of the sharing/talking circle with Indigenous perspectives and First Nations Treaty rights.

Question #6

Teacher's Question

What are a few examples of resources that I can utilize to help explain multiculturalism as a policy and widely practiced discourse in Canada?

Zahra Kasamali's Response

Multiculturalism is a complex and contentious topic. Here are some resources that I have found to be helpful: Laurence Brosseau and Michael Dewing's paper on the topic explores how multiculturalism functions as a sociological fact of life within the Canadian nation-state (Brosseau & Dewing, 2009). This website also opens the historical context prior to and following the introduction of multiculturalism in Canada and investigates provincial and territorial multicultural policies. I also use CBC Radio's (2019) interview with Keith Banting, which explores how Canada is also susceptible to xenophobic nationalism despite, and because of Canadian liberal multiculturalism. I think it is also important to look at the actual legislation, the Canadian Multiculturalism Act (1985).

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