

Retracing, Reimagining and Reconciling Our Roots in Social Work Education

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Abstract

This paper contributes to discussion regarding creative and arts-based research methods for researchers interested in pedagogies aiming for more meaningful engagement with decolonization and Indigenous reconciliation in graduate/undergraduate education of social workers in postsecondary university settings. We share our research and pedagogical process from SSHRC funded research carried out in a recent postsecondary course. We describe our a/r/tographic methodology involving practices of artmaking, attunement to everyday relations with the land and to our teacher and practitioner experience, aimed at finding more generative opportunities arising in these interrelations. Our research objectives include exploring the potential of art and artists for provoking complex conversations about Indigenous-settler relations in social work pedagogy as they relate to reconciliation, land and culture. Specifically, we explain some of the implications of artistic influence and aesthetic walking and writing practices grounded in local histories, land and culture for concrete steps in advancing social work education towards reconciliatory practice. By working alongside traditional Indigenous Knowledges, we were able to foster practices grounded in respect, relevance, reciprocity and responsibility across cultural difference. Using the land as one of our texts, walking practices, artist inspirations, and art-making opportunities engaged geo-specific Indigenous-settler relations and histories, providing immersive experiences aimed at more impactful learning. We share some beginning analyses of student responses that seem to convey how artists and art practices associated with the land may precipitate stronger implications for learning than those that occur in commonly expected student responses within a solely social-critique approach to facts.

Keywords: Arts-Based Research, Land, A/r/tography, Walking, Pedagogy

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Introduction

We are two university professors in postsecondary faculties of social work and education and in the spring of 2022, we were able to work alongside each other in the teaching of a social work graduate class entitled, *Current Issues in Aboriginal Social Work*. Because we both have strong commitments to finding ways to enliven the work of decolonization and reconciliation in our separate course teachings, we were deliberate in locating ways to attend together, to the student quotes below, the bolded sections of, which were representative of what we had received to this point. The quotes seem to indicate that while students recognize how important it is to know the facts of colonization, the conventional rationalist assumptions of anticipated learning responses often used in postsecondary curriculum, were re-inscribing hierarchies between thought and action, theory and practice, mind and body.

I know of these stories because I learned of it from school. But that was just it, we only learn of the history, **but not its relation to our present situation**. I have also taken some Indigenous courses before this one, but we were not really taught what to do or how to do social work when we work with Indigenous populations. (Excerpt from final paper, M.B, Student in SW 405: Social Work with Indigenous populations, Winter 2021)

Kimmerer (2013), has pushed me to reimagine lessons in cultural competency in ways that include engagement with the land. The immersive experiences we have had in this class live in the body in ways that the classroom settings cannot replicate. I recall feelings associated with provocation walks throughout this course that contain **more knowledge and learning than I would gain from memorizing frameworks and facts that are often presented to me**. (Excerpt from final paper, E.R. in SW 835, Spring 2022)

Premising social critique, reflection and consideration of all viewpoints seem to have become a way to transform learning into already-understood rational arguments and responses, through universalized capacities for language and reason. We found that these matters of fact are read too quickly. Immediate abstract rational explanations and observations that we hear repeated in the courses we teach, seem to perpetuate the very polemic relations that we are seeking to improve, in that students continued to feel at a distance from this information. As Bruno Latour (2004) notes, “explanations resorting automatically to power, society, discourse may have outlived their usefulness” (p. 229). Latour argues not for getting away from facts but for inquiries that permit one to get closer to them in order to detect how many participants are actually gathered into a fact in order for it to exist and in order to maintain its continued existence.

The students in this course were at various points in their graduate studies. Most had some familiarity with the terms decolonization, Indigenization and reconciliation but did not find them particularly meaningful to grapple with in terms of how they themselves, might be implicated or how they might respond to these concepts. Most agreed that the contestedness and complexity of the concepts—just made it difficult for them, even Indigenous students, to engage.

The need to think about this detachment between students and facts that was occurring even in the midst of this important teaching, became of interest to us. We hoped that art might help. Art changes things—itsself, and others and not in ways that are usually predictable. We

hoped the change that art might evoke might offer ways for our students to feel more woven into the web of relations even when they only have partial understanding. We turned to Elizabeth Ellsworth's (2005) work on pedagogic design to assist us in thinking through the focus of this course this past spring and we also turned to various other artists' connections to land. Before we discuss these influences and our turn to arts based teaching and research, we will tell you some of the details of our most recent course, our reasoning for making these changes and the course texts that served to fuel our pedagogy, artistry and imagination.

And—we will begin this introduction to the course with a two minute trailer draft from a film about our research in this course, on which we are currently working. (Film trailer unavailable for the proceedings.)

Course Details

This graduate course took place over 6 weeks; each class was 6 hours. The Faculty of Social work has two campus sites: one in Regina and another in Saskatoon. Students in the course lived near or in, one or the other of these cities that are a 2 ½ hour drive apart from each other. The course was offered in a format that allowed students to choose to attend either in person or via Zoom. We taught half the course on-site in Saskatoon and the other half on-site in Regina.

Currently, as co-investigators on a Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council funded project entitled: *Retracing, Reimagining and Reconciling our Roots*, we decided to attempt to change what we have experienced as purely fact-oriented teaching about the histories and contemporary effects of colonization. Instead, the research objectives for this research project include exploring the potential of the arts and artists for provoking complex conversations about Indigenous-settler relations in social work education as they relate to reconciliation, land and culture.

We are currently working with our research data and today we will share very preliminary findings based on student work. We will discuss some of our design thinking of assignments of artmaking, walking, and writing, and share a few of the student responses—all of which may offer new insight into social work pedagogy, research, and practitioner work.

Starting with Facts

While we critique the rational critique of facts approach, facts **are** important. In the Canadian context, for example, the key places to look for the most devastating manifestations of colonialism are found in histories of residential schools and the 60's Scoop, current child welfare practices and the incarceration of many Indigenous peoples, each described briefly below.

The residential school system operated from the 1880s into the closing decades of the 20th century. The Canadian government set up, and had administered by churches, a schooling system that involved the forcible separation of children from their families for extended periods of time and forbade children in these schools to acknowledge their Aboriginal history, heritage and culture. Further to this, students of these schools were severely punished if they spoke in their Indigenous languages or attempted to practice culture and ceremony. Former residential school student survivors have and continue to recount experiences of severe sexual, physical and emotional abuses.

First Nations social work scholar Raven Sinclair (2007) writes that the “Sixties Scoop” describes a period in Aboriginal history in Canada in which thousands of Aboriginal children were removed from birth families and placed in non-Aboriginal environments. In the mid-sixties government agents were tasked with the job to ‘scoop’ from their mothers on reserves almost all newly-born children (p. 23). Even today in Canada, 53.8% of children in foster care are Indigenous, but account for only 7.7% of the child population according to Census 2021 (Govt of Canada, 2022). Additionally, Indigenous adults make up 32% of the total number of incarcerated people in Canada and many of these situations are relatable to ongoing systemic racism in police forces and the legal system (Chartrand, V. [2020]).

In 2015, the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada (TRC) was created through a legal settlement between Residential Schools Survivors, the Assembly of First Nations, Inuit representatives and the parties responsible for creation and operation of the schools: the federal government and church bodies. The TRC’s mandate was to inform all Canadians regarding what happened in residential schools. The TRC documented the truth of Survivors, their families, communities and anyone personally affected by the residential school experience. This included First Nations, Inuit and Métis former residential school students, their families, communities, the churches, former school employees, government officials and other Canadians.

There are a total of 94 *Calls to Action* for structural change that were agreed as substantive and important to address and implement. However, as of 2022, Alessia Passafiume reports on the *Yellowhead Institutes’s Report* that indicates only 13 of the 94 have been actualized (Passafiume, 2022) So, Canada has much work to do. The question for teachers in educational settings is how to go about the *Calls to Action* in ways that not only provide important factual information but also offer opportunity for student response that is not predetermined and may be still very much in process.

Course Texts

In teaching, we drew on the work of Robin Kimmerer’s (2013) text, *Braiding sweetgrass: Indigenous wisdom, scientific knowledge and the teachings of plants*. Kimmerer who is a member and citizen of Potawatomi Nation is a botanist who embraces the notion that plants and animals are our oldest teachers. As teachers, we hoped that by learning about and engaging with what she calls the language of animacy, new appreciations of the land as teacher and healer might be enlivened in our students’ engagement with course ideas as well as potentially provoking new ways to appreciate and then practice social work.

In addition we chose Rene Linklater’s (2014) book, *Decolonizing Trauma Work: Indigenous Stories and Strategies* because of the way the book challenges mainstream disciplines of psychiatry and psychology and their biased influences on healing and wellness in Indigenous communities while also offering opportunity for non-Indigenous practitioners to consider how to overlap or interweave their own practices with Indigenous worldviews regarding healing.

Our Turn to Arts-Based Research and Teaching

One of the benefits each of has come to appreciate about arts-based research is that engaging art practices circumvents “... the literalness of language while gesturing explicitly to knowledge in the process of being made”, according to Ellsworth (2005, p. 168). Using art in

social work was a way of focusing on the learning self rather than on the fixing of knowledge by adopting pre-arranged positions or rational critique. We felt a need for a way out of perpetuating further binary thinking and instead, sought the pedagogical force of transformation that art already carries in changing itself and others.

Pedagogy, according to Ellsworth, is a force that is already at play in the world—one that gives form to being with oneself and at the same time being in relation to others; it puts our insides and outsides into relation without collapsing the difference between them with realistic representations or, indisputable facts. What gives voice to the learning self, according to Ellsworth, is not just the formal language of art but also invented and indirect communication and this includes poetic, metaphorical assemblages of movements/sensations in and through the study and embodied perception of paths, landscapes, buildings, and places, as they are sensed.

In our case, we are interested in the implications of aesthetic walking practices that offer opportunity to map one's reflexive engagement with the environment, practice the sensoriality of place in relation to ways of knowing, and engage in artmaking practices that are grounded in local histories, land and culture for concrete steps in advancing social work education towards reconciliation and reconnecting with land as teacher and healer for Indigenous populations. More specifically, the project focused on ways in which arts-based methods and the research methodology of *a/r/tography* might work alongside traditional Indigenous Knowledges to help social work students foster practices grounded in respect, relevance, reciprocity and responsibility across cultural difference. In this endeavor, we worked alongside Indigenous artists, medicine keepers and Elder helpers and were supported by a film student who was hired to document the weeks of this coursework.

Our methodology is best described as *A/r/tography*, which is an adaptive approach to research encouraging application of hybrid methods to document visual, auditory, sensory and text-based data as well as invite participatory approaches in artmaking, research and practitioner work. *A/r/tography* emerges from the practice of artists, teachers and researchers interested in the interdisciplinary pedagogy of contemporary art-making (May, O'Donoghue & Irwin, 2014) and is a way to invite practices of artmaking, living, knowing, teaching and learning to augment one another, inviting relationality in and among our roles, work and selves (Irwin & de Cosson, 2004). It encourages bringing together various practices of artmaking, everyday living and professional practice to find generative opportunities arising in this interference. We chose *a/r/tography* because of its opportunities for offering a sense of the entanglement of things one with another as well as with things not all present at once, including those things that are never entirely available to knowledge.

Lastly, walking on the land was an important part of our pedagogical design in this research, because of the many Indigenous scholars who claim the importance of “inserting people into relations with and on the land as a mode of education” (Wildcat et al., 2014, p.ii – in Madden 2019, p. 294). Walking is a way of channeling the earth's pedagogical force in its offering of potential for continual responsive repositioning. Each site engaged in our walking practice had geo-specific Indigenous-settler relations and histories, providing students a more immediate grappling with reconciliatory responsiveness.

Walking artist and architect Francesco Careri (2017) writes that walking is a good way to stumble on the ‘other’, and one way to approach conflict between differences is to walk with a non-belligerent greetings, disarmed, unthreatening, reaching for an embrace—advice that

works well in actuality as well as with the consideration of one's openness to learning difference.

Weekly Artmaking and Writing

Each week we engaged the class in some form of artmaking usually inspired by an Indigenous artist. Students completed titled artist statements that were a minimum of 300-written words explaining their materials, their process, various authors/artists/knowledge keepers whose work influenced their own, and shifts in one's thinking about reconciliation, retracing, reimagining or their ideas and reflections on rootedness—as well as some explanation regarding what they learned from the land. In this section, we share excerpts of a couple of these student responses and photographs of some of their artwork from various weeks.

One week, students learned beading techniques from a Saskatchewan Métis beading artist, Tania Nault (see Tania Nault, 2023). We also learned from Ojibway First Nations artist Malinda Joy Gray's (2017) research, that beads are examples of Indigenous resiliency and initially they were made from resources made available from the land—shell, bone, pottery, nuts, stone, horn fragments, etc. Furthermore, understanding the historical reciprocal exchange of land and beads might help shift's one's understanding of how the land was meant to be sustenance for all.

Our student Melinda Alexson shares her beading in the figure below and her thinking about rootedness that the artmaking evokes for her.



Figure 1, *Sitting Still*, Melinda Alexson, 2022

Alexson writes:

I remembered why I avoided beading. It forced me to become stationary, while my hands and my mind became busy. Linklater (2014) writes that working with traditional practices, perhaps like beading, may bring up memories for Indigenous peoples even if colonization mutes them. Memories can carve a path to culture and ceremony. I thought about the Elders and Knowledge Keepers, their kindness, patience, and love.

Drawing inspiration from Canadian artist Jackie Traverse and her painting titled *Harvesting the Hair of Mother* (2019), as well as from Saskatchewan mixed media artist, Maria Enns, students harvested grass and made grass baskets.

Our student Angela Luron writes:

Early in the week, I explored the outskirts of the city of Regina, hoping to spot some grass long enough to weave into a basket. I did find some, but since it was such a warm day and rain was in the forecast, I decided to let it grow a few more days. When I returned, the grass was 8” long. Being mindful of Kimmerer’s teaching, I waited until what seemed like permission from the grass arrived, as a whisper in my ear. I offered tobacco and took only what I needed.

A photograph of Luron’s basket is shared in Figure 2 below:



Figure 2. *Harvest Memories*, Angela Luron, 2022

Luron’s writing express a continued evolving theme for her throughout the course involving a desire to live in more intentional reciprocity with the land and its processes. She expresses the ways in which the land brings awareness of Western society’s obsession with the

ineffectiveness and potential damaging practice of putting people and their complexities into separate individual boxes and how engaging in reciprocal practices such as offering tobacco and asking permission require thought and consideration about reconciliation beyond one's own generation.

In another week's class students were inspired by ink artist Jason Logan (2018) who makes ink from whatever he forages in the city, sending unique small-batch pigments to artists all over the world. Logan that the process of inkmaking holds potential for changing how one sees and interacts with the world even while its process is not entirely knowable in words. This potential for changing how one sees and interacts with the world may involve engaging in the pedagogical force that Ellsworth claims is already at play around us, perhaps available through the land. Kimmerer (2013) writes: "Our Indigenous herbalists say to pay attention when plants come to you; they're bringing you something you need to learn" (p. 275).

Our student Gillian Cook writes her contemplations of reimagining in the midst of her inkmaking:

[In the inkmaking] I was influenced by Jason Logan's vision of re-imagining the items he forages from land that are long forgotten by others and yet he reveals their beauty and their energy. I re-imagined those others that have beautiful energy that have been forgotten, devalued, and cast aside by Westernized models of practice. Reimagining difference and interrelatedness of all beings and how this can influence social work practice.

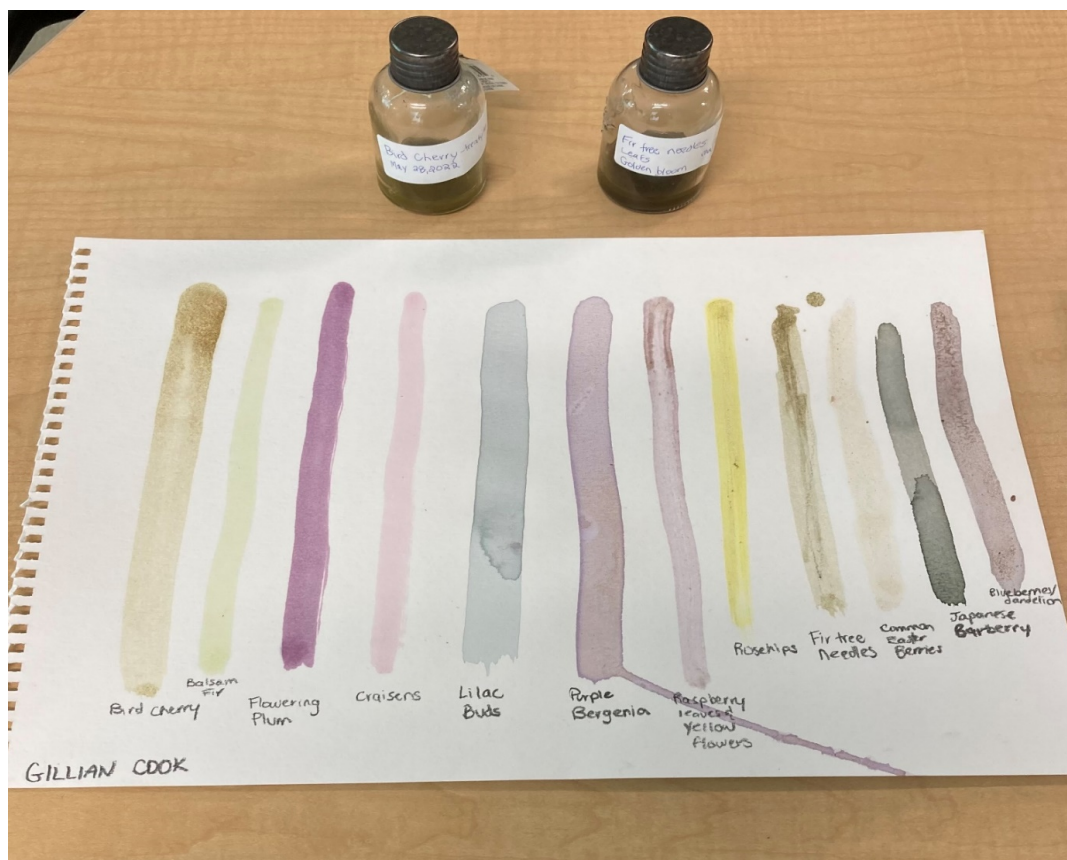


Figure 3. *Live Ink*, Gillian Cook, 2022

In further writing, Cook explains that Logan's work and her practice with inkmaking was a startling acknowledgement of the animacy of the world. In this teaching from the land she felt the ink as alive, waiting for its colour and energy to be revealed in ways free of expectation and predetermination.

Weekly Walking and Fieldnotes

In each weekly class, we provided in-class time for solo walks on which we encouraged the students to walk until something drew their attention—they were asked to linger and write in only descriptively—no explaining. Linger where one is invited by the nonhuman world, and then write some description. We encouraged students not to offer any explanation of what they saw. The rationale for asking them to remain in descriptive writing alone was to help them to attend to the actuality of the moment rather than return too quickly to what is already known or what they think they already know. Based on work in other courses (see Triggs, Sorensen & Irwin, 2022), we found that the longer students remained with description of the immediate present, the more likely they will find new knowledge emerging, rather than returning to their habitual pathways of thought and movement. When students slip too quickly into explanation, rational critique, or into a story of what they are reminded of, the materiality of the animate moment is lost and they miss the potential generated by each new actual emergence that is offered to them.

Student walking was further augmented each week with assigned “provocations”, which were quotes from class reading, mostly from the work of Kimmerer. They were designed as another layer of interaction with the land, as they walked. One example of a provided provocation includes the following:

...Bend and pull, bend and pull. Kaie'ri, wisk, ia:'k, tsia:ta, she calls to her granddaughter, standing waist deep in the grass.

Her bundle grows thicker with every stoop of her back. She straightens up, rubs the small of her back, and tilts her head up to the blued summer sky, her braid swinging in the arch of her back.

The breeze off the water sets the grasses weaving and carries the fragrance of sweetgrass that rises in her footsteps. (Kimmerer, 2013, p. 254)

Kimmerer's poetic writing and artful observations seemed to augment and orient student learning from the land. In their field notes about their walks, many struggled for words to describe the impacts they felt at a deeper inarticulate level and some indicated new awareness of how their body rhythms attune to the rhythms of the land.

Due to the time constraints in sharing our paper, we will not share examples of the field notes—but we will tell you we were amazed by the students' capacities for descriptive writing and for noticing the world around them, as well as by the learning that they gained simply by spending time with the land. In response to the invitations from the land and to Kimmerer's poetic text, students wrote with poetic sensitivity to their experiences of repositioning and opening to insights they had not previously considered.

Our last assignment involved final papers written by students which focused on one of the 4 R's we had emphasized: Reimagining, Retracing, Reconciling, Roots. We share a couple of

excerpts from final papers that seem to indicate students appreciated being able to connect to their learning voice that was still in formation, able to partially express their response through artforms as well as through poetic and descriptive language.

Our student Mikayla writes:

Coming into this class I thought I had learned all that there was to know about the history of Indigenous peoples in Canada, and the profession of social work.

In the first class where the course was laid out I assumed I would fulfill it in the same way I had in other classes, by giving the professor what they wanted to hear.

This invitation was different and after I completed the first assignment, I realized that there was a deeper learning that I was being called into.

Intrigued I accepted the invitation...Through the process of listening, walking art making I am learning the power of art as a tool for healing. (Mikayla Shilling, 2022)

Our student Hillary writes:

I am reminded of Kimmerer's (2013) words that "Alone" is a word without meaning in the forest (p.4), and to me this means that I cannot and should not do this work alone. Part of being culturally competent will require me to seek out partnerships that can support my practice, including building relationships with Elders, Knowledge Keepers, and Indigenous artists.

It is through Metis artist, Tania Nault's teaching of beading to our class that I was given the gift of understanding how making art like beading, can inspire the teaching of patience, presences and the expectation of imperfection. (Hillary Wand, 2022)

Conclusion

As authors and researchers, we still have much work to do with all of the wonderful responses that students produced. We will spend lots of time this winter analyzing data in order to understand more deeply what this kind of arts-based pedagogy might make possible for future students who will be currently, or will eventually become, social workers or teachers.

In the meantime, student work seems to indicate that pedagogic design for engagement in aesthetic (partially-expressed, partially-articulated) forms of response rather than for rational argument—and the orchestration of opportunities for experiencing the pedagogic force of land and art, students are feeling connections and responsibilities they did not feel before, in terms of working alongside Indigenous populations, or, in living in relation to the land and one another. With arts-based approaches, we are seeing that Indigenous and settler researchers and pedagogues may be able to design spaces of deep learning and knowledge creation with students in ways that focus on learning selves, rather than solely on predetermined knowledge, already-anticipated responses, or rational critique.

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