

Reorienting toward complexity in teacher education

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ABSTRACT

This paper traces our journey of collaborative inquiry as we revisit, reframe and repurpose influential scholarship. This involves pedagogical conceptions of experience and reflective thinking, informing the mindful complexity of being and becoming in place, while foregrounding local Indigenous Ways of Knowing and experiential learning as illustrations of a scholar-practitioner stance. Through inquiry in community, recognising the importance of drawing upon individual Teacher Candidate identity, we articulate how we learn as teacher educators to address the complex, contemporary issues of: equity, diversity, inclusion; decolonisation; education in times of crisis; and the challenges of ecological well-being. We are teacher educators committed to reorienting toward complexity in teacher education, given the multiplex terrain of the education landscape that awaits teacher candidates (TCs) upon receiving their Bachelor of Education degree. Within our context, we are preparing teachers to work with a recently revised curriculum and many regional, national, and global challenges and mandates, especially the Calls to Action of the Truth and Reconciliation Report of Canada (2015). By encouraging the agency of the TCs – the scholar-practitioners – with whom we work, we aspire to a reflective and deliberative approach of engaging with issues, needs, and problems as caring humans.

KEYWORDS: *decolonization, complexity, scholar-practitioners.*

INTRODUCTION

Our enactment of this vision is grounded in the work of various scholars who have long understood the complexities of teaching and learning, but like us, have struggled with articulating a lens for its enactment (Biesta, [Citation2021](#); Kane et al., [Citation2020](#); Macintyre Latta, [Citation2023](#), [Citation2018](#); O’Loughlin amidst powerful counter movements that dismiss complexity in favour of transmission and measurement models. At the intellectual heart of our redesigned program is the formative nature of professional knowledge embodied within the notion of a scholar [Citation2015](#)). The term scholar-practitioner blurs the lines between knowledge-practice (academic/theory) and inquiry-practice (practice itself) and lends to reframing, embedding, and legitimating the idea of scholar within education leadership and practice (Jenlink, [Citation2009](#)). Identifying as scholarpractitioners ourselves, we model – in our own unfinished/imperfect way – what it means to be ongoing students of learning, and encourage our TCs to embrace their own scholar-practitioner identities as educators, knowing that the discourse and experiences they encounter with us will shape them as educators in our current context (Brant-Birioukov et al., [Citation2020](#); Jenlink, [Citation2009](#)). The program welcomes students into learning communities that foster conditions for uncovering, unpacking, and repurposing individual/collective beliefs, attitudes and dispositions toward considering and reconsidering the role and nature of learning and teaching as part of building professional identities now, and for the future.

Our school's Bachelor of Education (B.Ed.) programme was recently redesigned with the deliberate intention of uplifting Teacher Candidate (TC) agency and deepening TC professionalism and self-understanding through collaboration and reflection, living at the experiential intersections of scholarship and practice.

We decided to critically review and thoughtfully renew our program, addressing changes in the curriculum alongside the literature, the research, feedback from the field, and insights from our graduates. Rather than change *what* we offer, we were changing *how* we offer it. In this way, we explored the possibilities for what teacher education could look like and rethought “what it means to be human” in a demanding profession, in the land we inhabit, and with the knowledge that what it is to be human is a question of practicing our relationality to the land (Donald, [Citation2021](#), [Citation2019](#)) and to others. With this in mind, the scholar-practitioner holds responsibility to rewrite the story (Donald, [Citation2021](#)) of where we have been, where we are, and where we are headed.

METHODS

After describing how we grapple with Dewey and Indigenizing the curriculum, we describe these four pathways: meditative inquiry, being and becoming in place, attending to local Indigenous Ways of Knowing, and experiential learning. It is the result of individual and collaborative reflection among eight individuals – graduate students and B. Ed. instructors working and learning together in the Okanagan School of Education ([Citation2022](#)).

These pathways open spaces to reclaim the complexity of education in our work and highlight how the pedagogical values of the scholar-practitioner influence action. The individual and collaborative reflection is supported with two years of TC writing by two different scholar-practitioner cohorts in the B. Ed. program. Each section of the paper is an intricate and inseparable aspect of our collaborative wholistic approach to teaching, learning, and leading as scholar-practitioners.

We illuminate what it means for us to engage with the complexities of teaching as scholar-practitioners, embracing Dewey's notion of reflective thinking as a catalyst to cultivate these ideas within our TCs. We understand reflection as ongoing and purposeful thought in relation to one's beliefs and knowledge. In this paper, a narrative description of our pathways demonstrates how we have engaged our students to foster and deepen their thinking through exploration and experiences designed to strengthen their scholar-practitioner identities. Dewey reminds us, “(i) that the educational process has no end beyond itself; Through recursive reflection, examination, and dialogue about our collective practice, we identified the emergence of four thematic pathways. We understand “pathways” as ways of metaphorically moving through, or exploring, the terrain of teaching. Certain of our actions and engagements appeared to be related over time. Our B.Ed. program intentionally cultivates conditions which are characterised by the four interwoven pathways that help cultivate the attributes of a scholar-practitioner within our TCs.

Dewey's Grappling toward Indigenous ways of knowing

We foster reflective thinking as happening within learning and teaching, not as something separate. Discussions, reading, art, movement, nature, and writing are all opportunities for students to nurture reflection. In Numeracy,



for example, we discuss the shape of graphs, and we stretch, bend, breathe, and take on the tranquillity of the smooth shapes. In Nature studies, the study of mandalas is one example in which we engage learners to offer insight pathways into art, nature and impermanence. Our TCs have the opportunity to creatively construct their own mandalas in nature to share their artistic sides along with their understanding that the world is always changing. We engage TCs in active learning environments that challenge them to continually clarify their truths and beliefs about education and ask why and how these either support or inhibit their growth as scholar-practitioners..For some students, however, the prodding toward reflecting on their beliefs and dispositions is difficult, and they tend to resist ideas of multiple perspectives, curiosity-driven learning, and critical engagement with long-held social beliefs. Many arrive to our program having only ever experienced competitive, content-driven education. They seek a “toolkit” to replicate these experiences and express disappointment when we do not oblige. Through collaborative inquiry, our B.Ed. classrooms become learning communities, where faculty and students observe and reflect upon the varied ways of thinking, knowing, being, and doing. We build patience, compassion, and support as we learn to live together through our experiences as scholar-practitioners. This approach emphasises the learner’s curiosity in learning and lends itself to interdisciplinary and thematic opportunities. While many elementary teachers feel comfortable incorporating an interdisciplinary approach, some subject specific secondary teachers struggle with teaching curriculum content in a thematic way. Exploring the nature of curriculum design as scholar-practitioners can provide TCs with ways of engaging with these ideas. Dewey’s primary notion of experience recognises that meaning is adapted, built and changed in ongoing engaged thinking between self and other(s) (Dewey, [Citation1980](#)). Implied unity and movement are critical to understanding experience as a moving force (Dewey, [Citation1980](#), p. 31). The scholar-practitioner’s responsibility to see and act within such curricular movement is the task we embrace. In doing so, learning (scholarly) and teaching (practitionerlike) become inseparable from each other, and are curriculum-as-lived. we attend to our common curricular orientation and effort as settler-coloniser-educators through the practice of vocalising our changing thinking. Our common curricular orientation involves confronting a history in Canada that has been largely hidden from students in the public school system prior to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada Report (TRC of Canada, [Citation2015a](#); Fontaine, [Citation2013](#); FNEESC, [Citation2015](#)). The First People’s Principles of Learning (FNEESC [Citation2015](#)) in BC are now firmly placed within the provincial curriculum.

The authors of this paper are largely of settler ancestry or immigrant families, and we acknowledge the importance of recognising Indigenous Knowledge (IK) (Battiste, [Citation2019](#); Battiste [Citation2009](#)) as fundamental to enacting the calls to action of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission ([Citation2015b](#)) Report in Canada. We also understand that IK holds understandings, which are vital to the regeneration and survival of Mother Earth (Armstrong, [Citation2009](#); Mohawk, [Citation2010](#)). These knowledge systems are complex and thousands of years in the making; they are systems that honour and respect life diversity. We foreground IK as we create conditions to understand each other, our uniqueness, our multiplicities, and our pluralities in the space and land we inhabit.

First, we describe how the use of reflective processes, such as that found in mindful practice, enable us to engage with our students in examining important topics such as diversity, equity, inclusion, and decolonisation. We then

describe how nature and eco-wisdom offer entrance into reimagining place-based learning. The third pathway discusses how we respectfully embrace Indigenous ways of learning of the local Syilx Okanagan People. In our fourth pathway, we consider how to revisit ideas of content – with Social Studies as our example – to embody inquiry at the heart of experiential learning.

Attention to mindful practices

It is mindful awareness of self in relation with others, nature, and ideas that Kumar ([Citation2013](#)) foregrounds as the transformative ground of curriculum as meditative inquiry. Kumar emphasises how this understanding of “the self functions in daily life, rather than its suppression or gratification,” as the “core of a meditative inquiry approach to education and life” (Kumar & Downey, [Citation2018](#), p. 62).

Dewey explained that the education process has two sides to it, one psychological and the other social, and stated that these must always be considered. His educational philosophy attempted to balance the inner (personal) with the outer (social), taking a mindful pedagogy to an active state in the world.

In reference to Dewey’s focus on the *active* state of the world and the living nature of education as embedded in context, we recognise antiracist movements, such as Black Lives Matter (BLM), sweeping our societies. Considering the urgent pleas for action of such movements along with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission (TRC) Report of Canada ([Citation2015b](#)) calls to action, there is emergent evidence that mindful practices can contribute to antiracist discourses. Within this context, Magee ([Citation2019](#)) suggests that mindful practices can support equitable, just, and fair ways of being and doing. Across courses, we encourage the sharing of autobiographies. The kinship that often emerges in mindfulness and compassion becomes evident and grounds the TCs to a larger collective. The mindful attributes of non-judgment, trust, patience, acceptance, and letting go can cultivate scholar-practitioner responses of observing, noticing and reflecting on long-held assumptions, building on Dewey’s concept of growth through reflection. For example, the principle of, “looking closely, exploring possibilities and perspectives, and introducing ambiguity” is an important consideration in mindful pedagogy (Ritchart & Perkins, [Citation2000](#), p. 27). In this paradigm, the move away from imparting a fixed canon of knowledge to developing understanding and exploration of new learning terrain is time-consuming and sometimes emotionally-laden. Through the introduction of ambiguity, we can go beyond the narrow confines of Eurocentric content to the broader exploration of ideas and problems, opening up the curriculum to the multitude of histories, content and perspectives of those who are Indigenous, Black, and People of Colour (IBPoC). Within this context, the world becomes a place where learners are actively involved in change, constructing new meanings and new understandings of previously held assumptions about historical tenets and socio-economic implications of power and privilege (Ragoonaden & Mueller, [Citation2017](#)). By introducing practices, such as the mindful pause, TCs learn to respond instead of react. This change leads to the creation of safe spaces where voices not only emerge, but are truly heard. By encouraging mindful dyads, each voice has the opportunity to be expressed and inclusion is naturally fostered

Place Attention

To grow our capacity to think reflectively as scholar-practitioners in this program we explore and play with the philosophies of experience, inquiry and connection as they relate to place-based learning and ecological wisdom. Dewey understood that wisdom sits in places. His philosophies of experience, inquiry, and connection along with his favoured naturalistic approach seem to resonate with our settler-coloniser and immigrant understandings of local Syilx Ways of Being (Armstrong, [Citation2009](#); Cohen, [Citation2010](#)). Similarly, Wagamese's ([Citation2016](#)) Ojibway Meditations are relevant considering contemporary issues of climate change, systemic racism, and global pandemics. Together, these ways of knowing highlight a widening capacity to see and act on experience that is embedded in places. Finding opportunities to engage with place and nature also impact our mental health and wellness positively, which is even more beneficial during times of crisis (Capaldi et al., [Citation2015](#)).

Things interacting in certain ways are experience; they are what is experienced. Linked in certain ways with another natural object – the human organism – they are how things are experienced as well. Experience thus reaches down into nature; it has depth” (Dewey, [Citation1981](#), pp. 12–13). Experience for Dewey is a relational process. Curriculum is not so much a linear course to run, but more like a spider web of relational interactions in our program

(Cohen, [Citation2010](#)). In this way, curriculum reflects nature's complexity theory and becomes a living system of relationships. Viewing place in this way contributes to our TCs' sense of what being human means. Dewey's lifelong commitment to anti-dualistic thinking, advocated that experiences be treated as a whole in this manner. In *Democracy and Education*, he writes, “When nature is treated as a whole, like the earth in its relations, its phenomena fall into their natural relations of sympathy and association with human life” (Dewey, [Citation1980](#), p. 221).

Reflecting on the importance of place in nature, wholism and relationality and explaining that we are all related, connected and belong to each other, Wagamese ([Citation2016](#)) wrote, “That means every person, just as it means every rock, mineral, blade of grass and creature. We live because everything else does. If we were to live that teaching, the energy of our change of consciousness would heal each of us – and heal the planet” (p. 36). By acknowledging that our experiences are embedded in places, we are able to weave together our threads of relatedness, creating a community of learning based on belonging and becoming (Cajete, [Citation2019](#); Cohen, [Citation2010](#)).

Ways of knowing

The experiences are as diverse as a Water Ceremony with Syilx Elders, and a Smudge Ceremony on the land. Through respectful exposure to and practice in oral storytelling, language, and traditional knowledge, TCs experience a local Indigenous way of knowing, recognising that the Western view of schooling is but one of many different perspectives. This local perspective serves to further open TCs' views to the Truth and Reconciliation

Commission of Canada's calls to action ([Citation2015b](#)), and gives them reasons and means to address the systemic issues faced that are rooted in lack of awareness of knowledge systems and colonialism. Dedicating time and space to deeply understand the distinct local philosophy and perspective develops a pathway to approach our common world problems with confidence, to stand up to ongoing colonialism with knowledge, humility, and kindness.

Embracing Syilx Okanagan ways of knowing (Armstrong, [Citation2009](#); Cohen, [Citation2010](#)), and building on Dewey's notion of reflection through discussion and reflective writing, we align with Pinar's ([Citation2011](#)) notion of complicated conversations, where teachers and students together grapple with thoughts and ideas to identify and articulate ways that knowledge speaks to them. In our efforts to engage students in complicated conversations we bring graduate students who work with the local Syilx Scholar to talk with TCs about their own involvement with learning local ways of knowing through a Coyote Stories (Cohen, [Citation2020](#)) study. With this "multigenerational" student component, complicated conversations and meaning-making have a tone of family discussion around complex learning and issues.

As we seek to challenge TCs to open their minds to knowledge systems and perspectives they may not have explored, we see them finding opportunities to build their capacity to relate with their own students in appreciative, meaningful ways, while recognizing and standing up to hegemonic structures (Cohen, [Citation2020](#)), modelling and living a scholar-practitioner orientation.

Attention to experience

Explorations occur inside and outside of the classroom and often conclude with discussion and reflection, providing spaces for learning to become "conscious," a reflective journey into learning and life – into the nature of being and becoming as scholar-practitioners (Macintyre Latta, [Citation2022](#)).

For example, BLM protests along with the TRC of Canada ([Citation2015b](#)) can lay the foundation for explorations of social constructions of race, history, economic inequalities, and unequal opportunities. We collaborate with our TCs to explore and develop lessons on geographies of exclusion, the psychological impacts on well-being of inequality, philosophical treatises on liberty and equality, and concepts such as perspective and equity. They study their own experiences and how these have shaped their views, and consider how they can bring self-reflection into their lessons (Macintyre Latta, [Citation2022](#)). Together with their students in their practica classrooms they explore where societies can go from here, and how. A contemporary problem thus becomes a catalyst to crossdisciplinary inquiry, anchored in the self and inquiry, illustrating the hyphen connecting scholar-practitioner.

Education as engagement in and through lived experience has educational implications, for as Freire ([Citation1970](#)) wrote, filling our students' heads with concepts they have to repeat back to us on tests does not educate. To develop new concepts, we actively engage and grapple with what we are learning; we embody



“experience.” We and our TCs, as scholar-practitioners, engage with the politics of language and culture to build capacity for reflection and action (Freire, [Citation1970](#)) within and beyond our program.

DISCUSSION:

Dewey wrote that, “active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of the grounds that support it, and further conclusions to which it tends, constitutes reflective thought” ([Citation1991](#), p. 8). As teacher educators, we model and live as scholar-practitioners ourselves; we engage in contemplation through self-reflection and collaborative discussions with each other. Our collaborative arrangements aim to provide space for instructors to connect and to reflect on relationality, sequences and processes, as well as to discuss how students respond to the knowledge, content, and processes of each block of study. Our own use of theory in teaching and learning builds and grows opportunities for new conceptualisations that resonate with current ideas, concerns, dilemmas, and opportunities, while ensuring the integrity of the theory. Contemplating, discussing and enacting ideas while allowing space for newness positions faculty and TCs to learn from the past, impact the present and ideate towards the future, with knowledge to speak confidently back to hegemonic policy and politics.

We continually reorient, reconstruct, and transform scholar-practitioner habits of mind alongside our TCs to position all to thrive in their future teaching in complex contexts, in various places. Dewey’s philosophy of experience and his conceptualisation of the reflective thinker, intersected with mindful practices, place-based learning, local Indigenous Ways of Knowing, and experiential learning support our TCs in developing a richer, more nuanced understanding of education, learning, teaching, community, and life. We aim to inspire our graduates - continuously learning scholar practitioners - to develop their teacher agency, embracing their own capable stance of responding to the challenges of our contexts. This includes taking up the Calls to Action of Truth and Reconciliation in what is also known as Canada, while articulating bold, inclusive visions for the future, through a collaborative and recursive redesign of curriculum, orienting toward complexity.

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