Duni zuz ‘utilnilh, ‘tanning moose-hide’: weaving Dakelh (Indigenous) intangible cultural heritage transmission with academia

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ABSTRACT

After many years of colonisation and oppressive policies, Indigenous cultures in Canada are reviving elements of their cultural heritage. As such, numerous Indigenous communities are working with higher learning institutions to safeguard elements of their heritage, specifically, knowledge and land-based practices. In this article, we discuss one case study of Dakelh (Indigenous) knowledge-holders that merged the practice of traditional moose-hide tanning with academic components surrounding issues in cultural heritage. With the intention of transmitting information about the field of ICH as well as safeguarding one Dakelh intangible cultural heritage element, we developed an experiential-learning university course that grounded theoretical issues in Indigenous cultural heritage. In discussing our methodology of merging the two ways of learning and teaching, including the benefits and challenges of such a course, the article elaborates how the combination of traditional and academic methodologies in a university setting can help Indigenous communities transmit their intangible cultural heritage to younger generations.

Keywords

Dakelh/Carrier, Indigenous people, traditional practices, tanning moose-hide, Nak'azdli Whuten and Tl'azt'en Nations, *uda' dene khuna*, decolonising and 'indigenising' academia, embodied pedagogy, Canada

Introduction

We are going to share a traditional practice that my mother has been doing her whole life. She has been [tanning hides] *since she was five. Her mother did this all her life also.*

[Yvonne Pierreroy, Tl'azt'en and Nak'azdli Dakelh Elder and co-instructor]

Processing moose-hide usually begins with an experienced hunter killing the *duni*, or moose. Once the animal has given up its life for the hunter, then the butchering of the body begins: cutting the animal appropriately, respectfully, and removing the skin in such a way that it remains in one piece. Expert hands slice through the body to make sure all the edible parts can be processed as well as all the non-edible parts like bones, brain and hair that can made into tools, sinew for thread, and tufts. So, *oozuz dunt'oh whe hits'uhahuyulhchus, 'the hide is removed as one whole piece'.* From that point on, a skilled tanner turns the heavy, membrane-covered skin into a soft, light-brown hide.

The traditional Dakelh way of *dani zuz 'utilnilh*, tanning moose-hide, can take one person over three months. If one is experienced, that is. The process begins with *duni ghages*, skinning the moose. Traditionally, the skin would be placed in a fast-moving stream or lake so the hair would fall out on its own, but placing the skin in a water barrel in the backyard of a Canadian suburb also works. Subsequently, the heavy, membrane- and fur-covered piece of skin is put on an *umusdi* (frame) to be stretched, de-fleshed, have the hair removed, and be dried. Next, is the scraping process. It involves scraping, and scraping, and more scraping until your hands hurt. This step includes using the *be'ugelh,* a metal scraper specifically designed to remove the hair or fascia. Sometimes the *lhustih* (a knife) is also used; and if one is lucky, an *'utongwut* (a bone scraper) can also be used. The*'utongwut* is a traditional tool made from the shin bone of a moose and fashioned into an angled, toothed device. An accomplished handyman can also custom-make scrapers out of car parts, and one of the Dakelh Elders involved in the process was indispensable for his help in making the tools, sharpening them and even fashioning other gizmos to help in the tanning process. From that point on, if everyone is equally disciplined and follows a strict schedule, if all members are willing to do lots of tough physical labour yet be gentle enough to have a good hand technique with the tools, it can take a group or a community about three weeks to complete the hide-tanning. The most fundamental aspect of the practice however, is knowledge and skill, which experienced Dakelh tanners from the Nak'azdli Whuten and Tl'azt'en Nations in Canada, are attempting to pass on to future generations.

The Dakelh are a Carrier-speaking peoples located in the central plateau of British Columbia, Canada, and with the hope of revitalising and passing on the practice of traditional hide-tanning, two Dakelh Elders, Mildred and Yvonne, collaborated with a First Nations Studies professor to create a university course to help bring attention to the declining practice and to seek help to revitalise it. In the context of safeguarding Dakelh intangible cultural heritage, this article discusses an experiential-learning, traditional knowledge-based course at a Canadian university. Here, two Dakelh knowledge-holders worked with academics to collaborate on a course that wove the process of moose-hide tanning together with diverse theoretical issues on cultural heritage. By outlining our methodology, and describing some of the benefits and limitations of running such a blended-learning course in a university setting, this article discusses how higher learning institutions can serve as a mechanism for merging two knowledge systems together to safeguard the intangible cultural heritage of Indigenous peoples in Canada.

An era of renewed Indigenous nationhood in Canada

Due to numerous colonial policies, including the removal of Indigenous people from their traditional lands, certain cultural practices - like moose-hide tanning in the traditional way - have significantly diminished in many communities. Certainly, a number of Nations continue to tan hides in the way that previous generations taught them, however, knowledge of how to complete the process from start to finish using *uda'dene khuna*, 'the old way', as some Elders have indicated, is not as common a practice among the Dakelh as many traditional tanners wish it were. In turn, Canada has been increasingly recognising the value of Indigenous cultural heritage and knowledge for understanding and sustaining the natural environments of their respective traditional territories. There is on-going research and

policy-making for the decolonisation of academia and the strengthening of Indigenous research, knowledge and expertise in Canada [Smith: 1999; Mihesuah and Wilson: 2004; Kuokkanen: 2007; Pawlowska-Mainville: 2020]. Especially significant was the 2008 launch of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. The Commission was designed as part of the reconciliatory process that guides Canadians through the painful history of the residential school system.

The residential school system was a government-sponsored network of religious schools established to assimilate Indigenous children into Euro-Canadian culture. Along with additional assimilative policies that further contributed to the cultural genocide of Indigenous people, the residential schools' policy was to separate children from their parents *until there is not a single Indian in Canada that has not been absorbed into the body politic* [Scott: 1920 quoted in Milloy: 1999, p.46]. To redress the assimilationist legacy of residential schools and advance the process of reconciliation, the Canadian Government created the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada. The commission created a series of challenges to the different levels of government called the 'Calls to Action' to restore elements of Indigenous heritage, including the preservation, revitalisation and strengthening of Indigenous languages and cultures [TRC: 2015, 14.iv & par 16]. It is important to emphasise that currently, three out of four of the 90 Indigenous languages in Canada are said to be endangered, with the residential schools being viewed as one of the main contributors to this language loss.

Stipulating that culture and language revitalisation projects should be community controlled, the 'Calls to Action' nevertheless stipulate that post-secondary educational institutions play an essential role in these endeavours. Unquestionably, the commitment to respond to these 'Calls to Action' is growing in academia, and inclusion of Indigenous knowledge in institutions, particularly in education, has led to the emergence of varied alliances between Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and policy-makers. How the process of decolonising and 'indigenising' academia is approached and carried out varies significantly across the Nation [Gaudry and Lorenz: 2018]. Gaudry and Lorenz [2018] write that one form of indigenisation in Canada is to focus on rebuilding and strengthening Indigenous cultures and knowledge. As part of our own attempt to respond to these 'Calls to Action' through 'indigenisation', we focused on the rebuilding and strengthening of Indigenous peoples' heritage by developing a unique academic course focused on revitalising a traditional practice that is a fundamental part of Dakelh intangible cultural heritage.

Methodology: transmission via experiential learning

Traditional practices of Indigenous people are often seen as separate from academia, however, there exists a plethora of voices that advocate for significant changes in the current ways Indigenous knowledge is included in education [Corntassel: 2012; LaRocque: 2010; Kuokkanen: 2007; Gaudry and Lorenz: 2018]. Our approach was to find a scenario where Dakelh and Western academic teaching methods could be fused while also effecting positive institutional change. At the outset, the idea of creating a course that fused seemingly oppositional approaches to knowledge-production was indeed met with administrative and epistemological hesitation. How will the lengthy and arduous physical practice of moose-hide tanning be brought into academia – both physically and methodologically? How feasible is it to bring in a hands-on learning component that requires access to the outdoors, but also to provide university students with a satisfactory method of



Plate 1
Our classroom space where academia and Dakelh knowledge and heritage were woven together.
Photo: Agnieszka Pawlowska-Mainville, 2016.

evaluation? Numerous hours were devoted to planning and creative thinking to find a way to integrate a lands-based experiential Dakelh pedagogy into a traditional Western university curriculum.

We developed a class called 'First Nations Cultural Heritage through Moose-Hide Tanning'. This was a three-week long course weaving two educational styles and skills together. 'Academic' work consisted of readings, discussions, and assignments in the classroom, and it was merged with the hands-on process of tanning a moose (and a deer) hide with two Dakelh Elders. With the hope of revitalising and passing on the Indigenous practice of traditional moose-hide tanning, the Elders were engaged by the institution to transmit the knowledge and skills associated with this activity. Our key goal was to have the students experience the two pedagogies without rupture; essentially, we did not want to have the in-class or 'academic' portion at a different time from the 'Dakelh' portion of the course (Plate 1). Our attempt was to illustrate to the students that certain learning mechanisms - like listening, patience, willingness to learn and hard, repetitive work - are employed by both and hence can be well-utilised in an academic setting as well as out on the land. It was also emphasised throughout the class that these same mechanisms are also necessary to safeguard elements of intangible cultural heritage (ICH).

As such, the strict course schedule for this class was actually used as a conceptual framework for the course. In other words, the in-class components were incorporated into the natural process of the hide, so when the hide was soaking, resting, or left to absorb grease, the students were in the classroom working on ICH scholarship through lectures, readings and discussions. As Figure 1 demonstrates, the grey boxes were days spent outdoors working on the hides, and the red boxes were times spent inside the lecture hall. Here, strategic times such as *nanooltsul ha nat tatdzin te* (soaking the hide in water for 2-3 days), allowed the hides to 'do their own thing' while providing us with the space to discuss the readings and issues associated with First Nations' cultural heritage in the classroom. The schedule meant that the class ran on a very detailed and prescriptive programme because, unlike a book or manuscript that can be put down halfway through for one day or even one month, a moose-hide cannot be put to

FNST 444 – Class Schedule at a Glance

Mon	Tues	Wed	Thurs	Fri	Sat	Sun
May 2 UNBC Welcome & What is cultural heritage?	May 3 YP: *-Yubat'us 'i nk'ez yubuz* *-Beta'dilt'as*	May 4 YP: *-Ooghasin cha yedughelh*	May 5 YP: *-Ooghasin cha yedughelh*	May 6 **UNBC:** Repatriation & legal contexts **Read: Article #1 (Fisher)** **DUE DATE 1** YP: *Yuk'eta'dile*		
May 9 UNBC: Linguistic heritage **Read: book** YP: *Yuk'eta'dile*	May 10 UNBC: Cultural heritages & protection **Read: Article #2 (Hennessy) & explore** http://www.nwtexhibits.ca/tlicho/	May11 UNBC: Locating culture **Read: Article #3 (Valaskakis)** **DUE DATE 2** YP: *Nanooltsul ha nat tatdzin te*	May 12 UNBC: Issues in cultural heritage: archeology and industry **Read: Article #4 (Leon)**	May 13 YP: *Nayuguz whe naidulhgih* OPEN DAY		
May 16 YP: *Nayuguz whe naidulhgih*	May 17 UNBC: Heritage development **Read: Article #5 (Thorsby)** **DUE DATE 3**	May 18 YP: *Uldzeh*	May 19 YP: *Uldzeh PRESENTATIONS*	May 20 YP: *Lhut be'Ulneh* *POTLUCK & PRESENTATIONS*		

Figure 1
A snapshot of the class schedule that was based on the nature and practice of tanning hides in the Dakelh way. The schedule interlaces the traditional practice 'led' by the hide (days marked in yellow) and academic in-class components (days marked in red) together while also weaving in Dakelh *ghuni*.

the side and completed when convenient. If the process is interrupted or curtailed to a timeframe different than what the hide requires, the final product will be ruined. Likewise, once *beta'dilt'as* (de-fleshing the hide) is begun, it must be completed quickly otherwise the skin will dry and harden and essentially become unusable [Plate 2]. The students received the schedule on the first day of class and we continually emphasised that while we had some flexibility in the coursework and could postpone a reading or presentation for a day or two, it was really the hide that was guiding us and governing our time through the three week-long course.

Intangible cultural heritage embodied through pedagogy

The course was important for my own identity as a Carrier person
[Tanya, a Dakelh student]

For the students, Mildred and Yvonne, the two Elders, were the embodiment of the in-depth knowledge and skilled practice associated with *dani zuz ˊutilnilh,* moose-hide tanning. That embodiment manifested itself through the gentle smell of smoked hides that filled the room when the women showcased their hand-sewn moccasins, gloves and other artistries. Both Elders live and breathe tanning: whereas Mildred, who lives alone in her community of Nak'azdli Whut'en, has been tanning hides regularly since she was five years old, Yvonne, her daughter, continues the tanning tradition in the city and even has an old-style wringer permanently installed in her backyard. The two women physically embody Dakelh intangible cultural heritage through their skilled but often sore hands; and the students have seen them rub their aching fingers as they pulled and stretched the hide for days at a time [Plate 3]. The women's creativity in incorporating innovative tools and diverse techniques into this traditional activity is indicative of their knowledge of the hide and what it will permit them to do. The practice of *dani zuz ˊutilnilh* permitted university students in the course to see first-hand the embodiment of the Dakelh/Indigenous ICH they read about in the class.

Although the benefits of embodied pedagogy have been explored by numerous scholars [Forgasz: 2015; Smith: 1997; Wilcox: 2009], multi-modal learning, that is to say, the use of moving bodies in academia, continues to be seen as something *outside the academic norm* [Forgasz: 2015, p.1]. Whether through a lecture in an amphitheatre-style classroom or by sitting on the floor of the home and listening to an Elder share oral stories, learning by listening continues to be the dominant form of transmitting knowledge. Eschewing the notion that intellect and the material body are often seen to be in binary opposition in the process of academic learning, and contrary to the assumption that Indigenous knowledge is only passed on orally, we added a Dakelh performative aspect to this 'oral tradition' of knowledge production. Rather than focusing on the oral teachings behind *dani zuz ˊutilnilh,* we relied on the body to transmit



Plate 2
Students and Elder Yvonne examine the size of the raw moosehide prior to processing.
Photo: Agnieszka Pawlowska-Mainville, 2015.



Plate 3
Students stretching the hide. Stretching is a tedious but very important part of the process.
Photo: Agnieszka Pawlowska-Mainville, 2015.



Plate 4
Students scraping the hide on a traditional stretcher and with a diverse mix of tools.
Photo: Agnieszka Pawlowska-Mainville, 2015.

knowledge [Pawlowska-Mainville: 2020]. In our unique class, Dakelh knowledge and all the other elements of intangible cultural heritage associated therewith, were passed on rhythmically, through our bodies. By means of pulling, stretching, pacing, watching, standing, speeding up and slowing down, embodied engagement in revitalising Dakelh ICH took place. Curving wrists the right way, laughing through repetitive scraping actions, as well as removing bloody moose pieces from their hair, allowed university students to mobilise and engage in this traditional practice.

As the students scraped the hide, day, after day, after day, they became aware of their own bodies in this process. Sweating, cutting their fingers on the knives as they pulled out the hair and moose membrane, many bemoaned their aching bodies as early as the second day of class. Stretching-and-scraping the hide is the most tedious aspect of moose-hide tanning but it must be done often and regularly, so all participants were forced to ignore their sore knuckles and *uzus tubecho ninguz* (pull on the hide very hard). This form of learning about ICH was immensely valuable because it not only offered a comprehensive approach to teaching and learning but also encouraged *a symbiotic relationship between theory and practice, and between abstract (theoretical) and localized (applied) knowledges* [Smith: 1997]. The course permitted the students to read and process the notion of intangible cultural heritage not only in words and texts, but also through sounds, faces, gestures and other bodily expressions. Oftentimes, our tanning expert, Mildred, toiled at the hide without a word, thus teaching the students an element of Dakelh heritage by virtue of her performativity [Plate 4].

The Dakelh people traditionally learned by watching and then doing: Mildred learned how to tan hides because her mother had needed help with processing the hides ever since she was a young girl. Likewise, Yvonne, Mildred's daughter, also learned how to tan hides by helping her mother. This form of transmitting cultural practices and knowledge was also how Yvonne learned to do other things like sewing and making fish nets: it was largely because her parents told her *to do the work, and if it was not well done, they would undo it, and tell me to fix it* [Yvonne Pierreroy, 2017 personal discussion]. One Tlingit student on the course, Brandy, acknowledged that learning by getting involved is the way she learned about her heritage:

> *Yvonne learned to make moccasins and how to prepare moose hide from her mother. I also have the knowledge to make a drum, octopus bag, and plant medicines because Aboriginal Elders were kind enough to share their expertise gained through generations. During the tanning* [class], *a grandchild was allowed to join us and watch as we worked so he too could learn. Yvonne's mother spoke the Dakelh language, the Nak'azdli dialect, so we could listen and perhaps ask questions about what a word meant or how to pronounce it. To pass on this knowledge, I believe you must be willing to learn, listen, and be filled with patience* [Brandy, 2016, personal communication].

Intergenerational transmission of moose-hide tanning was key in understanding the depth of ICH. For many Indigenous (and non-Indigenous) university students, being removed from their own communities to undertake their studies is an unfortunate reality. While they complete their three- or four-year university degrees, they lose out on speaking their (often endangered) languages, and on learning traditional skills from their Elders. The Dakelh student below explains the challenge in learning the traditional practices of Indigenous people:

> *Being invited to learn about tanning moose-hides was an incredible experience. I have elders in*

> *my family who tan their own hides, trap their own animals, and hunt their own game. I am unable to seek out this traditional knowledge by my own family, as I live to*[o] *far away, and timing never works out in regards to getting this teaching time in* [as] *I am in school. Further, being able to have hands on guidance on the process of tanning a moose-hide was very important to learn. As I believe that having this traditional knowledge will be a positive gain to my own personal understanding, as I can keep learning from this base point. I feel that moose-hide tanning is a practice that requires experience in the sense that the more times a person practises a skill the better they become at it.* [Tanya 2016, personal communication].

In our experience, educational institutions like universities can be mechanisms not only for teaching about ICH, but also for transmitting intangible cultural heritage. With that intent, the entire *dani zuz 'utilnilh* (moose-hide tanning) process was filmed and made into an instructional video to further ensure the continuity of moose-hide tanning in northern British Columbia (the video can be viewed at https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GpWo7sEDCR0). Consequently, viewing this class as a tool to inform and transform how academic Indigenous pedagogy is approached, embodied and transmitted, all the in-class readings and assignments, as well as the tanning itself, were meant to be highly applicable conceptual tools for a community and individuals.

Dakelh *ghuni* in the flesh

While learning the traditional 'recipe' and techniques of smearing moose brains to preserve a moose-hide in the old Dakelh way, the students simultaneously learned about the 2003 UNESCO *Convention for the Safeguarding of Intangible Cultural Heritage* as one mechanism to assist in safeguarding Indigenous traditional knowledge. Although the discourse of intangible cultural heritage is largely absent from Canadian heritage discourse, and the *Convention* has not been adopted by Canada, discussions about First Nations' cultural heritage must also include the intangible forms of heritage. Indigenous people were historically prone to colonial fascination and the immense confiscation of their artifacts for museums, study and romanticised aesthetic value [Cole: 1995; Doxtator: 1992; Pawlowska-Mainville: n.d.]. Fearful of the vanishing Indian, and motivated by civilisation, assimilation and Christianity, not only were tangible ceremonial pieces, cultural artifacts and sacred items seized, stolen or bought from Indigenous people, but intangible elements of culture as practices by people were deemed uncivilised and prohibited by law [Cole: 1995; Bell and Paterson: 2009]. In spite of these oppressive policies and actions, the rich collection of narratives, oral histories and languages, skills and practices as well as ontologies and knowledges of Indigenous nations in Canada, continue to exist through Elders, knowledge-holders and tradition-bearers like our tanning experts, Mildred and Yvonne.

As members of the Carrier Linguistic Society, a community-based organisation devoted to recording and preserving the Dakelh language, the two women also came into the classroom to discuss the importance of Dakelh *ghuni* (the Dakelh language) within traditional practices and the teachings embedded within them. Because Yvonne and Mildred are hide-tanners as well as trailblazers in language revitalisation, the class relied heavily on Dakelh *ghuni*. The language is *how we express ourselves*, Yvonne states as the students are busy scraping away flesh from the hide. Because *our words are actions, we lose a lot when the language is translated* [Yvonne Pierreroy 2017, personal communication]. Dakelh *ghuni* is one of numerous Indigenous languages threatened with disappearance in Canada, and it was our goal to have the students learn at least a handful of Dakelh *ghuni* words by the end of the class so that they recognised the connection between the verb-based Indigenous language and the way of life. As such, we selected about fifteen Dakelh *ghuni* phrases related to *dani zuz 'utilnilh* that we tried to use consistently throughout the course. We attempted to ensure phrases such as *snachailya,* 'you have honoured me', (often used as 'thank you'), *duni zuz*, 'moose-hide', and *nanyoost'en la*, 'I will see you later', were embedded into our daily activities, both in and out of the classroom. Figure 2 exemplifies a few of the terms that were used. The terms were also placed on large index cards so they would remain visible at all times.

When the students were *tl'ooh nyo un'a ookw'unayuhgus* (put[ting] the rope in downwards) as they stretched the hide, Mildred and Yvonne spoke

hadih - hello
snachailya -you have honoured me
(one person speaking to one person)
'uzus oogha ts'unk'us - hair side of the hide
duni zuz - moose hide
'umusdi' - frame
lhustih - knife
'utongwut - bone scraper
nanyoost'en la - I will see you again
ndiz un'a inghelh - scrape this way
tl'ooh nyo un'a ookw'unayuhgus - put the rope in downwards
'uzus tubecho ninguz - pull on the hide very hard

Figure 2
List of Dakelh *ghuni* terms that were embedded into daily practices and class components.

about the relationship of Dakelh *ghuni* to seasonal cultural practices. Accordingly, abstract English words for the months of 'August' and 'December' became meaningful in Dakelh *ghuni* as cultural expressions reflective of land-based heritage: *taloo ooza* (August) is the 'month of the salmon' echoing the salmon fishing and preserving season; *dzin dilhdukw*, 'month of short days' (December) mirrors the season of long nights. Therefore, while also transmitting this endangered language, university students began to understand that Indigenous peoples' conceptualisation of time, space and linguistic expressions are profoundly braided together into intangible cultural heritage.

The combination of theory and praxis as well as the learning-by-doing and learning-by-reading helped validate to the students that a significant portion of cultural heritage elements are actually embodied through the practices – and not the products – of the Dakelh. Theoretical frameworks of current policies on heritage management, protection measures, and revitalisation approaches were embedded into the class as part of the collaborative effort of working together to tan the hide. The practical application was focused on five broad issues surrounding First Nations' cultural heritage, including the identification and appreciation of cultural elements, colonial policies and the repatriation of cultural artefacts, linguicide and language revitalisation, decolonising archaeology and museum studies, as well as capturing and safeguarding intangible cultural heritage in the context of identity politics and economic development. In each topic the students read, discussed and were asked to explore through active-learning exercises, some solutions to specific problems within cultural and heritage studies. Guest lecturers who assisted in further understanding the issues included an archaeologist working with First Nations' communities in British Columbia and an archivist working in the digitisation of materials. A Dakelh knowledge-holder who shared his experience of making a living from his land-based heritage was also invited to show the students that 'traditional skills' are not a dying art. Thus, while the hide was either soaking or drying in the Elder's backyard, the students discussed the challenges of protecting intangible and material cultural heritage and examined the changes that are necessary to defy existing power structures that continuously affect these issues.

Lessons learned

The opportunity for university students to learn about and experience an element of Dakelh intangible cultural heritage in an academic setting was unique in Canada. Many of the students enrolled in the course saw the process of moose-hide tanning for the first time, and many of them gained a greater appreciation of the work involved in preparing hides. One student, stated: *I never knew the work that went behind all the beautiful moccasins I see. I always thought it was good that people made moccasins and beaded them, but I never knew all the stuff it takes before moccasins are even made. Snachaliya* [I am honoured] *for this knowledge* [Devin 2016, personal communication].

As educators, we often encounter students who are immensely eager to learn more about their culture, their heritage and especially their languages, of which they were deprived due to the colonial history and assimilationist strategies of the state; Indigenous students are especially keen to learn about their own heritage. In our experience, students often come into university and take courses in the discipline of Indigenous studies hoping to learn more about Indigenous issues and cultures. In learning about the convoluted history of Indigenous-State relations, students frequently develop a deeper interest in their own heritage as well as in re-discovering their own cultural values and knowledges. Many ask questions such as, what does it mean to be a good Anishinaabe

man or a strong Tsilhqot'in woman? What constitutes traditional ecological knowledge, and do I have it? What were the guidelines my Nation used to make decisions, to conserve certain species, or to govern our people? What components make an economically healthy Gitxsan community without sacrificing traditional lands or practices? Many of our students are not only eager to learn (or re-learn) elements of their own heritage, but some are even embarrassed or uncomfortable with the fact that they know little about their own peoples, cultures, and history. Classes which incorporate cultural practices, such as our moose-hide tanning process, into academia, are especially significant for Indigenous learners.

The feedback we received from students who participated in the tanning activity was tremendous. One student enrolled on the course and for whom her Indigenous heritage unfortunately does not play a strong role in her life, stated that *although Dakelh isn't my cultural heritage, I really enjoyed getting a perspective on what Indigenous knowledge can look like and how integral it is in forming a sense of community* [Megan 2016, personal communication]. Another student, Shannon, articulated that the merging of a cultural practice with the readings on the discourse of traditional ecological knowledge have taught her the value of her own heritage and of higher education, especially since both consist of an immense amount of hard work:

> *A lot of people (myself included) did not understand … the entire process and the amount of work that is put into creating one hide.* [We] *now have an appreciation for the products made from the process and understand its value. Learning this traditional aspect of culture helped me re*[-e]*valuate myself and forced me to remember why I am in school. … I had been debating on leaving school and returning home because I felt like I could not be away from home any longer. Spending these few days with Yvonne and her family made me feel connected to people again, connected to culture, and connected to life. I found that learning about the process of hide tanning had more meaning for me than what most people would have pulled from the experience. I felt like each step represented my grieving process. Near the end after a lot of hard work and elbow grease, there was a beautiful scraped hide* [Shannon 2015, personal communication].

Danielle, a Metis student, found the process similarly eye opening:

> *It was humbling for a number of reasons, because I personally did not fully understand how much time, effort and skill goes into the entire process of moose-hide tanning. Not to mention how incredibly tiresome the process was … Although the new more modernised contraptions in which they used the wringer, as well as an adjustable stretcher was very amazing to see because of the common belief of First Nations peoples' being stuck in the past. Obviously, this is not the case, because Yvonne and her family have opened my eyes to alleviate this misconception because they are still very much traditional as well as modern.* [Danielle, 2016, personal communication]

A significant number of the students expressed the hope that the fundamentals taught in the moose-hide tanning process will help them identify their own cultural heritage elements. The academic skills and knowledge learned in university were interpreted as



Plate 5
Elders Mildred and Yvonne checking the smoking of the hide.
Photo: Agnieszka Pawlowska-Mainville, 2015.

tools to help the students contribute to the health and success of their own communities. Tanya, a Dakelh student, said that *learning the process of the hide and seeing the practice as an embodiment of numerous other elements of cultural heritage was reinvigorating. … it was so good to learn about my own culture and my past* [through this course]. *And it helped me find what being Dakelh is* [Tanya, 2016, personal communication]. It is interesting to point out that one Gitxan student, Devin, not only participated in the hide-tanning process, but was inspired to complete a teaching degree so he can open up a language nest to help revitalise his threatened Gitxan language.

The class was symbolic for the region of Canada in the sense that university students and community members were provided with the rare opportunity to tan hides in the traditional Dakelh way – but in the suburbs of a city [Plate 5]. The flexibility of the Elders to run this activity outside of its 'natural' season (hides are normally tanned in the fall) was a big component of our ability to run the course during the school year. This flexibility reflected the transmission of the 'living' heritage of intangible cultural heritage. Furthermore, not only was the experiential-learning component of tanning open to individuals from the city and to neighbouring communities - without the obligation to do any written assignments - but we also held an 'open day' in mid-tanning-process and encouraged the public, including the media, to come and join us in learning about Dakelh ICH. We had over thirty participants come out on that day, and even children from a local school had the chance to help stretch the hide while learning about higher education.

There were however, some challenges with running such a blended course, one of which was the institutional calendar. Since the class ran during the spring (in the month of May), many students who really wanted to take the course could not, as their funding and/or student loan organisations would only cover full-time students (and one course per term does not count as such). Hence, many students had to choose to either pay for the course themselves or take an additional two courses to meet the full course-load requirement for that season. Unfortunately, this funding restriction prevented numerous Indigenous and sponsored students from taking this course; many students who found themselves in this dilemma communicated to us their disappointment at the educational and political systems which hindered their ability to take this unique class. The funding restriction informed us that such blended, culture-based courses continue to be both misunderstood and too little valued, both by universities and by mainstream society. This fact resulted in us running the course with fewer students enrolled than we had initially anticipated, and illustrated to us that the commitment to decolonise and 'indigenise' [Gaudry and Lorenz: 2018] must go beyond academia to include government and policy.

Another challenge we faced was funding. Although we had support from the university to carry out the course on a specific timeline and locality, we had to apply for funding to pay for the Elders' honoraria and for all the materials necessary for the class. This means that had we not secured any funding, the course would not have taken place. Certainly, valuing such courses and Indigenous knowledge-holders (whose inclusion in academia is limited by funding), remains a significant limitation in the process of revitalising Indigenous intangible cultural heritage in Canada. Thus the overarching discourse on the importance of ICH in Canada can be helpful not only in de-colonising the educational system, but also in valuing Indigenous knowledge and enlarging Indigenous rights.

Conclusions: embracing final thoughts

Merging Dakelh traditional moose-hide tanning with a university-based course was a novel, albeit challenging, learning opportunity at our institution that unfolded with the various cycles of the moose-hide itself. University students were provided with the opportunity to learn about Indigenous peoples' intangible cultural heritage while simultaneously embodying the practice of *dani zuz 'utilnilh* (tanning moose-hide). This embodied pedagogy was used to illustrate that safeguarding and transmitting Dakelh heritage can be as labour-intensive a practice as achieving academic excellence.

Closely tied to a bodily experience, the course on Indigenous cultural heritage in Canada relied on pedagogical structures such as personal narratives, scholarly examples, in-class activities and experiential learning. Working within this framework permitted learning about intangible cultural heritage in a way that combined praxis and theories. Institutions such

as universities, therefore, can become efficient mechanisms for providing another space for young people, who may be removed from their own communities to attend university, to remain connected by learning directly from knowledge-holders. This blending of both Indigenous and academic ways of learning and teaching can be helpful through the fact that, unlike train-tracks that run side-by side and never meet, the two styles of transmitting knowledge and heritage can merge symbiotically to complement each other for the benefit of enriching Indigenous intangible cultural heritage in Canada.

Finally, as grease was absorbed into the moose-hide on a warm May day, university students engaged Dakelh Elders in language and knowledge of Dakelh culture. As educators, it was our understanding that knowledge exists in the university, in the bush, and in an Elder's backyard in a city suburb. And sometimes, that knowledge is transmitted without a word. Mildred's skilled hands scraping the membrane and Yvonne's arthritic fingers stretching the hide simultaneously embody the revitalisation of a traditional Dakelh activity and a revitalisation of Indigenous knowledge in academia.

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