

Good Neighbours, Good Friends: Promising Practices for “Partners in Place”

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Abstract

This piece is a series of dialogues and reflections about an ongoing learning partnership between Connect Charter School and Chilla elementary school of the Tsuut’ina Nation in Calgary, Alberta, both situated on Treaty 7 land. Through interview transcripts, reflections, and reminders from our scholarly influences, we reflect on how the project began with the hope for the two communities to be "good neighbours," and how they eventually became "good friends." We share the challenges, joys, and controversies surrounding this project, and how it continues to evolve based on dialogue and community collaboration.

Keywords: place-based education; indigenous education; life writing; ecological education

The task of decolonizing in the Canadian context can only occur when Aboriginal peoples and Canadians face each other across historic divides, deconstruct their shared past, and engage critically with the realization that their present and future are similarly tied together.

—Dwayne Donald, 2012, p.535

In what follows, we share stories about a multi-year, collaborative learning partnership between Connect Charter School, located in the community of Lakeview, and Chilla elementary school of the Tsuut’ina Nation, entitled “Partners in Place,” and a Fort Calgary collaborative permanent mural exhibit. Connect Charter School and the Tsuut’ina Nation are geographically situated next to each other on Treaty 7 land. The impetus for the partnership first began in the spirit of being good neighbours. Over the course of the partnership, this relationship has evolved to a deeper friendship between the two communities. The stories are drawn largely from interviews with Shashi Shergill for Jodi Latremouille’s (2019) doctoral dissertation, entitled “Teachers as eco-intellectuals: cultivating miyo pimatisiwin” (Cree: the wisdom of living a good life). Influenced by life writing and literary métissage (Hasebe-Ludt, Chambers & Leggo,

2009), we share a dialogue of stories and reflections, set alongside reminders from our curricular, critical, ecological, and Indigenous influences. We deliberately use first and last names in citations to acknowledge our sense of obligation to our scholarly relations.

A Conversation Part I: Journeying from Head to Heart

Jodi: My parents were born and raised in the interior of British Columbia, and had set down roots in Merritt, B.C. by the time I was born. I was raised on a five-acre mountainside hobby farm, in a log house that my father built. I am a small-town woman, student, teacher, researcher, parent, ecological activist, and urban university instructor. Most of my great-grandparents immigrated from France, England, Syria and the United States around the turn of the 20th century.

Shashi and I have been good friends since we worked together briefly in 2013-2014. I invited Shashi to be a participant in my doctoral research because I know her to be an articulate, deeply self-reflective teacher who fully embodies social and environmental justice in her work, ways of speaking, and ways of living.

Shashi: My name is Shashi Shergill. I'm an administrator at Connect Charter School (2012) in Calgary. I participated in this research because I want to share how much this project has changed me--in terms of my practice, in terms of the relationship with Tsuut'ina Nation (2020), and in terms of how my awareness and understanding has evolved. Not growing up in Canada, Jodi, I'd never come across the term Indigenous persons or people, or Aboriginal people. I remember the first time I went to Kitimat, BC, where my husband grew up. He took my sister-in-law and me for a drive once, and said, "Oh, we have to show you the reserve." And I didn't even know what that meant. And I still remember it, driving like we were on some kind of tour bus, driving through this First Nations reserve, Haisla Nation (2015). My husband has talked about his experience growing up, and how there was real tension between the East Indian community and the Indigenous community at that time. The "othering" experience of being inside the vehicle and looking out...oh. it was just an awful experience, but at that time, really, I had no context for this. At that time, we were still living in England and we'd just come back to Canada for a visit.

It was only years later in reflecting on those experiences that I understood where my sense of justice has come from. It's really thinking about marginalized people, thinking about my own kind of personal experiences growing up in England, and thinking back to my ancestors and some of the stories that my mom told me. My grandfather was in the Indian army during British occupation, and there is a whole history of colonization in my own family. I wrote about my mom talking to me about when she and my dad first moved to England in the early sixties when there were no workshops on how to get along with white people. They had no sensitivity training, right? And she said all we knew about these people was that they came and took over our country. And she said, "But what we did was we lived side by side with them, and we got along with them, and we made friends." And it goes back to Dwayne [Donald's] concept of ethical relationality, it's those ethical relationships that you formed and that you got to understand and know each other, and there was reciprocity.

Ethical relationality is an ecological understanding of human relationality that does not deny difference, but rather seeks to understand more deeply how our different histories and experiences position us in relation to each other.

—Dwayne Donald, 2012, p. 535

Shashi: Those were the reasons that my parents now call England their home, that they choose to live there after all of these years. But it was fraught with tension, because

they were living in a community where a lot of people did not want them there. Then they came here and really learned more and gained understanding about Indigenous people and their plight in Canada. That's why that's something that's very very very, deep with me, and I feel really connected to.

Oh, I'm getting all choked up.

Elder Bob Cardinal, following Joe P. Cardinal, teaches that "the longest journey is kistikwānihk êsko kitêhk, from the head to the heart."

—personal communication, September 28, 2014

A Conversation Part II: Coming to the Work

Jodi: So, Shashi, some teachers become more oriented to social justice, ecological justice than do others. Do you think there's something in your upbringing or your background that oriented you to that from the beginning, or were there moments in your life that pushed you to that?

Shashi: I think that there've been defining moments. They become more noticeable now when I reflect on them as an adult. I think, in terms of the social justice, growing up in England, and attending schools that were predominantly white, I was typically the only non-white child in my class, and as was very typical of schooling there, I experienced quite a bit of racism. My harshest memories of experiencing racism are connected to school, and so then being in the classroom and a school environment now, makes me so much more mindful of my practice, and the role of teachers. There are some defining moments for me where the role the teacher played had a huge impact on my experience, quite often negatively.

A huge influence was my father; you know. My father was a bus driver and then he became a trade union secretary. He was very rights oriented and gave me a socialist kind of thinking and upbringing. That sense of justice has always been really really strong for me. After university, my first job was as a race equality policy developer in social services. I took that anti-racist practice certainly into my teaching, and then, you know, softening the language for a Canadian audience to social justice.

Jodi: How do you see the relationship between ecological and social justice?

Shashi: I would say that at Connect is where I really developed that stronger sense of understanding, and being far more purposeful, meaningful and thoughtful in my practice around the ecology. But even when we think about the word ecology, I mean, even in the biological sense, it's about relations, it's relationships between

organisms. So I can see how, in terms of being a huge social justice advocate, that ecology is just like a natural bridging into my practice. But, certainly, it wasn't easy, it really wasn't easy because I was born and raised in England, in a very urban environment. The idea of outdoor education or being immersed in nature really wasn't part of my upbringing and it certainly wasn't part of my schooling.

I don't really have many memories, I think a field trip to a farm—

Jodi: Right! I milked a cow once!

[Jodi and Shashi sharing a laugh together]

Jodi: I really enjoy what Lesley (Tait, *Personal Communication*, February 19, 2019) said about the purpose of education being to help students find their gifts, and to find how they might use those gifts for betterment.

Shashi: Yes, how they want to live in the world.

Jodi: Shashi, it sounds like the school that you're at is a rich place for this kind of work. I'm really curious about the things that happen at your school that support this kind of eco-intellectual work that's going on.

Shashi: So a lot of that, Jodi, [at Connect Charter School] is around teacher autonomy. One of our grade 8 teachers designed a whole spring trip for the grade 8 students. The grade 8 Social Studies curriculum here in Alberta focuses on worldviews. And so this teacher wanted to explore that concept of worldviews through a trip to *Writing on Stone; the Southern Alberta Worldview Tour*. It's just about understanding Indigenous worldviews, in a place, in a setting that really lends itself purposefully to those teachings.

Wisdom is knowledge in action.

— Richard Wagamese, 2016, p. 130

That's an example of something that just comes from the grassroots—from the teacher. This year will be our third trip. And Randy Bottle is going to come with us on this trip as well, so we're really, really excited about that.

Jodi: David Smith (2014) asks: "If education and teaching basically concern the stories we tell the young about life, what are the stories that need to be told today" (p. 1)? If teachers are the storytellers of our society, we are responsible to ask questions around what stories will be told, how they will be told, who will tell them, who will hear them, and then to make decisions as to how to go about all of these activities with our children.

Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013) writes that the Plantain's immigrant survival strategy "was to be useful, to fit into small spaces, to coexist with others around the dooryard, to heal wounds" (p. 214).

Shashi: As a school, our learning has evolved as well. It's constantly emerging and evolving, but very much that idea that we're all in this together.

[The Plantain is] a foreigner, an immigrant, but after five hundred years of living as a good neighbor, people forget that kind of thing (p. 214).

A Conversation, Part III: Imperfect Love

Shashi: Actually, all of this collaborative work with Tsuut'ina came around the time of controversy in Lakeview, the community where Connect Charter School is located. The ring road development was moving ahead. This project would impact the residents of Lakeview Community and Tsuut'ina Nation in different ways. The Lakeview Community Association invited a member of the Tsuut'ina Council to an open town hall meeting they had organized, which was held at our school gym. The Council member shared some details about what they were proposing for the entertainment district. The Taza (2020) entertainment district project caused some tension in the local community as they were concerned about how it would impact them, after that everything became quite political.

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—Dwayne Donald, 2012, p.535

Within the Lakeview Community Association, a subcommittee of the board was working on some really good relationships with Tsuut'ina. But there was tension between a smaller faction of people called "Save Lakeview," and others in the association. A number of the original members of the association resigned. In the end, the president resigned as well, because there was just so much tension around this issue of the development. I think ultimately what happened was the "Save Lakeview" faction ended up taking over the whole Association.

Jodi: Right. And so what were the "Save Lakeview" faction's biggest arguments against this development?

Shashi: I think it was just that whole NIMBY (not in my backyard) attitude, you know? There's some million dollar homes in that area, right? And then they're going to look out onto the Taza entertainment district. The "Save

Lakeview” faction wanted to block off the access to 37th Street. And there’s an actual access there onto the reserve that goes back hundreds of years, I think. And so now there was this contention over who owns the land, and who owns that access. And then, it got to the point where some were saying, “Well, we should block off services here.”

But maybe what needed to happen was a focus on listening, understanding and elaborating versus defending one’s position.

—Dwayne Donald, 2016, p. 26

Shashi: Our school was in this precarious situation, because one of the town halls, where things got really heated, was being hosted at our school. And I was the school administrator on site. It was on a Saturday, and it was standing-room only. It was packed, and the tensions were really high, and that’s where the president of the Lakeview Community Association got up and resigned.

Jodi: A teacher-education student once reminded me that our “Creator’s love for us is unlike our own fragmented love. Creator’s love is abundant, pure and generous. This is our strength in times of weakness” (Ahstanskiaki ManyFeathers, personal communication, March 2015). I think about how as educators, we are compelled to bravely “stand up as examples of how a life might turn out” (David Jardine, personal communication, January 14, 2016), to stand up as examples of imperfect love in our commitments to our places and relations.

Shashi: Because there was just so much tension, we wanted to ensure that we remained neutral as a school because we didn’t want to be seen to be aligned with the negative aspects of the controversy. Our principal reached out to Tsuut’ina and said, “We just want you to know we’re not part of this, we’re not involved in this controversy.” Our partnership is still strong but we’re doing this work against the backdrop of all of this tension and so it makes it even more important.

A Conversation, Part IV: Good Friends, Good Neighbours

Jodi: I’d like to hear about how your “Partners in Place” project with Tsuut’ina started out.

Shashi: So in 2018, our school put together a Calgary Foundation Grant for a project titled “Partners in Place.” We asked Tsuut’ina Education and Mount Royal University (MRU) to join us in building a sustainable relationship bringing our two school communities together. It was actually our current principal that made that connection—we tread very lightly, as did Tsuut’ina. And, you know it took us that whole year of the work to get there. At the beginning of this school year their

director of education said, “You know, we’ve had other schools approach us, but we want to work with you.” And a year later, at the reception for the powwow celebrating the project, the principal of the Tsuut’ina Senior High said to us, “I have to be honest, at first we were a little bit skeptical about who these people from Connect Charter School were, and what this journey was going to be like.” He said, “We probably get twenty requests a week from people who are just checking off a box.” We remembered how initially it was just really about treading lightly, all the while being conscious of our intentions as a school. Our intentions were never, ever about a checklist. It was a genuine commitment to that relationship: we are neighbours, let’s be good neighbours.

To become naturalized to place means to live as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your spirit. To become naturalized is to know that your ancestors lie in this ground. Here you will give your gifts and meet your responsibilities.

To become naturalized is to live as if your children’s future matters, to take care of the land as if our lives and the lives of all our relatives depend on it.

Because they do.

—Robin Wall Kimmerer, 2013, p. 214-215

Shashi: We used some of the grant money for a two-day symposium for parents and teachers around place-based learning (Amy Demarest, 2014). At the parent symposium it was mostly our Connect Charter School parents. A couple of Elders from Tsuut’ina came, but unfortunately no parents from Tsuut’ina. And again, that’s been part of our learning, in terms of understanding the role of parents in the school community—it looks very very different at Tsuut’ina compared to Connect.

We also conducted an Artist-in-Residence program, with an artist from Tsuut’ina who worked with our students. Every student in our entire school was involved in that project and they ended up creating two large mural art pieces. One part of it lives at our school and the other part lives at Tsuut’ina. We celebrated the project with a big joint powwow at MRU. That involved our school and Tsuut’ina. We wanted to have this symbolic walk where our students joined with the Tsuut’ina students. Our grade 7 students joined together with the grade 4s and 5s with whom they had worked, to walk together to the powwow, from the Grey Eagle Casino at the top of 37th to MRU. Everyone watched the powwow, which was absolutely incredible. It was the culminating event, with all their Council members, board members from our school, as well as administrators, some parents, members of the

Lakeview Community Association, and lots of other members of the community. So it really was a community event beyond our school community.

That demonstrates to students how it lives. When you walk alongside other students (not quite sure how this sentence fits here. How what lives?).

Transformation at the base of consciousness and at the heart of being is what we as educators are after here.

—Heesoon Bai, 2009, p. 145

Jodi: And so how does this project relate to the Fort Calgary mural project?

Shashi: Around the same time, we were actually approached by Fort Calgary for a completely different project. They said, “We have this idea for a mural project, and we’d really like your school to be involved.” This was kind of serendipitous because we were just in the early stages of our relationship with Tsuut’ina for the “Partners in Place” project. So then we got thinking that the Fort Calgary mural was about Indigenous perspectives, and Fort Calgary had actually been consulting with a group of Elders around the project. The grade 7 teachers said, “Well, why don’t we ask Tsuut’ina, because we’re partnering with them already on the ‘Partners in Place’ project, maybe would like also to be involved with the Fort Calgary mural project.”

The director of education at Tsuut’ina put us in touch with the principal at Chilla elementary school, on Tsuut’ina. And so we connected.

This Fort Calgary mural project was a bit different in that it was more of a joint planning process. I remember going with the grade 7 teachers to that first planning meeting, and now we’ve become very much aware of how things are different—you know sometimes they’re similar but they’re very different. And we were sitting in this meeting, and the teachers from Chilla elementary had just been told about this meeting five minutes ago!

But it worked out great. After a couple of meetings, I backed off, and just let our grade 7 teachers run with it. They met with the grade 4 and 5 teachers at Tsuut’ina. And when we talked about the project we decided that the first few encounters had to be really just about getting to know each other and about students making friends with each other. There were lots of “getting-to-know-you” games and activities. We did that a couple of times, and then worked in small groups to start thinking about some of the mural design.

Each student had a panel that he or she was painting. And oh, one of my most powerful moments, Jodi, was the

unveiling of the mural at Fort Calgary. Everyone was outside and we had the Elder say a prayer, and then the staff took the kids class by class to see the permanent exhibit at Fort Calgary—but watching the students’ faces. And the mural is amazing, it’s spectacular, but watching the students’ faces, and they were like looking for their panel—

Jodi: Right, oh, finding their place.



Photo Credit: Shashi Shergill. Mural Project. Fort Calgary Museum, Calgary AB. 2018

If we are to realize our full potential as [...] conscious Earth citizens, we will need to “remake our world in more holistic and far-sighted ways.”

— Neil Turok, 2012, n.p., as cited in Marie Battiste & Rita Bouvier, 2013, p. 9.

Shashi: And then the staff had them sign their names in sharpies on the border, all around the edging of it, but that experience...

We actually had some of our students speak to our Board of Directors about it, and I was just blown away at how

they articulated their understanding of what reconciliation means to them through that work.

And you know, describing the students as their friends, our friends at Tsuut'ina, right? You know, it's those kinds of experiences.

Another powerful moment for me was at the beginning of this year— through the Artist-in-Residence program we created two murals, one at Connect and the other at Tsuut'ina. Tsuut'ina hosted a small assembly where we presented the mural. We took about a dozen students from our school who had been more involved to participate in that.

Breakfast was prepared for everyone including our students. A few Connect students came to me to ask, "Ms. Shergill, why do they have a breakfast program here?" I replied, "Well, if they didn't have a breakfast program, a lot of the students that attend school wouldn't have breakfast. And so it's really important that they have a breakfast program, and actually all of the meals are provided for them." And the expression on our students' faces was almost like—it was part guilt in terms of, "We had breakfast and now we just ate here," and then just that realization of how different our neighbours' lives are from ours. And for me it was, ok, those moments, that is why we're doing this-- [for] those moments of recognition, and understanding.

Jodi: And it's their friends.

Shashi: And humanness. It's their friends.

And similarly with the teachers, it's just lovely, because now those grade 7 teachers when they see those other teachers they give big hugs.

Paulo Freire (2005) challenges educators to: dare in the full sense of the word, to speak of love. We study, we learn, we teach, we know with our entire body. We do all these things with feeling, with emotion, with wishes, with fear, with doubts, with passion, and also with critical reasoning. (p. 3)

Shashi: And I have to say, Jodi, there was also an incident where we realized how fragile everything is...

I think this happened after the unveiling [of the mural], but there was another time when the kids from Tsuut'ina came to Connect, they were all outside playing on the playground.

One of our students who was not a participant in the project, made a war-cry sound.

And the Tsuut'ina teacher heard it and saw it. And we dealt with it as an incident, but it was also an awareness of how fragile everything could possibly be.

And actually, the Tsuut'ina were incredible, because the conversations were about forgiveness. It was all about forgiveness, and for us it was a lot of anger and just being upset and so disappointed, and—

Jodi: And shame, too, I bet.

Shashi: And shame, yeah, and ... for the grade 7s, the grade 7 teacher was devastated, absolutely devastated, that this had happened.

Jodi: Right, they want to protect the relationships of the people, right?

Shashi: Yeah, yeah. And also, the students might have heard that.

Jodi: Right. That's very fragile.

Shashi: Yes. It's complex and we're never going to get to everyone. It's never a reason not to do these things, but it's also an awareness that you've got to keep doing it, and you've got to ensure that you're bringing people along with you, that they understand the purpose and the relevance and the meaning behind it.

In a world

That fragments

Separates and isolates

LOVE

Is an act of rebellion.

#ChooseLove #VoteLove #loveisaverb



—Towani Duchscher, facebook post, April 4, 2019

Jodi: Together, we are trying to learn sakihitowin (Cree: love). It is the messy, careful, attentive, detached yet watchful love of the in-between, humane, relational spaces.

Shashi: And then following on the success of that, this year, we've taken a little bit of a different approach. One of the things that we were very conscious of in that relationship—and I actually think I came out and said it because I felt comfortable as a non-white person being

able to say it—was that we did not want this relationship to be one-sided. That it was not about, oh, what can we do for you, and us being the experts, and we never ever wanted that with students, we never wanted relationships with students where we were othering the students at Tsuut'ina, and I think I even used the word "white saviour" in a meeting...

Recognize limits. "Love requires the capacity to say no as often as to say yes. It's defined as much by what it doesn't do and will not do as by what it does"

—David Orr, 2004, p. 25.

Jodi: So, how did you continue your evolving partnership with this in mind?

Shashi: Again, being comfortable enough to say that this was about a reciprocal relationship. The next iteration of the "Partners in Place" project was titled "Social Problem Solving through Design Thinking," which was a year-long partnership between two junior high classes funded through another Calgary Foundation Grant. The focus of this project, which was completed in 2020 was on using computational thinking to address social issues in both communities. Tsuut'ina identified bullying as an issue in their school community, and Connect identified mental health and anxiety as a social issue. The project initially focused on nurturing relationships amongst the students, then moved into looking at how we could leverage technology and principles of design thinking to promote wellness in our respective communities. The ideas for the final projects ranged from creating websites, designing instructional material for use in the classroom, and teacher professional development on mental health first aid. Unfortunately, the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the completion of final projects, but we are working on creative ways to celebrate and share our work together. (Partners in Place, 2020) This year-long project highlighted new learnings, understandings, and complexities, along with a growing understanding that there are some limits on how far you can push that reciprocal relationship.

... In a world of relations, the only flourishing is mutual flourishing.

—Robin Wall Kimmerer (2013, p. 15).

Shashi: As educators we were called to be brave in navigating the complex space between these two groups of students from different communities. We were challenged to look beyond our idealistic vision of the project to consider more deeply what a relationship between students who occupy different realities and experiences can look like. What are the important conversations to be had when we experience joy, but also weariness or

discouragement in this work? The relationship of reciprocity and progress can be experienced in many ways. It can be concealed within the complex connection between "being" and "doing." The students at Connect were demonstrating more of the "doing," yet for the students at Tsuut'ina their "being," their meaning making, and reciprocity in this work was more privately articulated in their personal reflections with their teacher and not as much in the exchanges and interactions with our students. We could see the progress even though it wasn't evident to the Connect students in ways that they might expect or understand.

In answering the call to undertake brave intergenerational work, what can we learn from these examples of promising practices that encourage others into this work? How do we learn to go forward, and learn to grow forward whilst bringing others along?

Jodi: How do we lift each other up?

Shashi: In an interview looking back on the most recent collaborative project, a student from Tsuut'ina Nation shared a reflection with me. They said, "Friendship takes time." And I think about the steps to reconciliation, our students are taking those—they're modeling for other generations what those relationships could possibly look like.

...good friends, good neighbours.

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Elder Bob Cardinal of the Enoch Cree Nation has given permission to print excerpts from the oral teachings that he has shared, and he has provided ongoing and generous support of all the work stemming from the 2014 course that he co-taught with Dr. Dwayne Donald, entitled "Holistic Understandings of Learning."

Randy Bottle is a Kainai knowledge keeper and Elder. He shares teachings on issues relating to colonialism and reconciliation from a Blackfoot perspective.

Note

The planning of the Southwest Calgary Ring Road dates back to at least 1952, when 940 acres of the northeast corner of the Tsuut'ina reserve was purchased by the Department of National Defence from the Tsuut'ina. After more than 30 years of negotiations and controversy, a deal was signed in 2013 that included land transfers and cash compensation, and a route that would pass through the Tsuut'ina Tsuu T'ina First Nation and a corner of the Weaselhead. To learn more, please see City of Calgary (2018) and Jesse Salus (2013a; 2013b).

Authors

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