

Unlearning in the Classroom: Collaboratives, Arts-Based, and Restful Modes of Learning

This piece is the product of a collaborative, arts-based, and restful intervention into the individualized and hierarchical modes of academic learning. I have long been suspicious of academia's compulsion to name the method of sitting and listening as the best form of learning. Don't get me wrong, I enjoy giving and receiving a good lecture every now and then, but I am also intrigued by the creative interventions that take place in classrooms that shake up our ideas of what fruitful learning looks like. I think it is essential that we begin to unlearn the assumption that the best form of learning takes place in hands-off, hierarchical settings.

As a Métis-settler student, I feel a deep responsibility to attend to the ways that I am simultaneously complicit in the harms of colonial institutions and the target of this violence. As Michelle Murphy states, "to be a white-coded Métis in settler colonial spaces is to be messily pulled between systems intent on Indigenous erasure interconnected with structures of white entitlement" (114). Part of tending to this responsibility, then, is intervening in spaces that overwhelmingly prioritize colonial methods of producing and disseminating knowledge.

My research as a graduate student focuses on articulating a way to respond to the deeply exhausting ways that the settler state has (historically and presently) attempted to subdue/oppress/assimilate/annihilate Indigenous communities. This response sees rest not as succumbing to these oppressive powers but as a method to actively resist them. It is difficult to present this work without a significant emotional toll as well-meaning peers and professors ask for more details on the violence than the response. So, instead of asking them to listen to me, I asked them to take a break.

Instead of presenting my work to them, I provided them with one piece of this artwork to colour while they reflected on the meaning of rest. For my work, I do mean the actual act of sleeping, but I also call upon an expansive understanding of rest that sees itself as anything that operates as a break from everyday stressors or routines that soothe and rejuvenate – whether that be for the physical, spiritual, mental, emotion self or a combination of those. Jenny Odell’s concept of ‘doing nothing’ shapes this expansive understanding as she states that “‘doing nothing’ – in the sense of refusing productivity and stopping to listen – entails an active process of listening that seeks out the effects of racial, environmental, and economic injustice and brings about real change” (22). Tricia Hersey reflects this sentiment in her argument that rest is “not a place to waste time but instead a generative place of freedom and resistance” (27). Rest is not a place to pretend that the stressors and violence around us do not exist, but it is a place to tend to the wounds and injuries of this violence.

A tangible method of engaging in this sort of expansive rest is presented in collaborative, arts-based interventions into our ways of learning. Kim Anderson contends that “the need for creative expression as a means of healing and identity recovery is crucial in many Native women's lives” (142). Collaboration is essential, though, because it “emphasize[s] building strategies of community, not just individual, survival and flourishing” (Murphy 109). In stepping away from the colonial and capitalistic pressure to always formulate the best question or response, we open space for reflection. Jenny Odell asserts that “having recourse to periods of and spaces for “doing nothing” is of utmost importance, because without them we have no way to think, reflect, heal, and sustain ourselves” (22). Bringing in low-stakes, reflective art practices to our spaces of learning gives us the room to reckon with the ways that we inherit and enact harm and tend to the exhausting and complex emotions that reckoning brings.

Works Cited

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