



JOURNAL OF Perspectives in Applied Academic Practice

‘The Truth About Stories’: Coming to Compassionate Pedagogy in a First-Year Program

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ABSTRACT

This essay describes the development of a compassionate pedagogy by way of three experiences the authors had as co-teachers in an experimental, first-year, integrated, cohort-based program in the Arts, Social Sciences and Humanities. In attempting to build a curriculum to tackle the “fragmented and incoherent educational experience” (Marra & Palmer, 2008, p. 113) that privileges answer-mining over the understanding of scholarship as a conversation among “essentially contested ideas” (Gallie, 1955), we found that our program reproduced the very restrictive, top-down, positivistic paradigms we sought to overcome. In reimagining the program and our role as teachers, we took our cue from the story of Charm, or Sky Woman, as told in Thomas King’s Massey Lecture, *The Truth About Stories: A Native Narrative*, in which Western hierarchical paradigms of creation are challenged by a First Nations story of collaboration and co-creation. Compassionate pedagogy, we learned from our experiences as co-teachers, cannot be developed in the abstract; rather, it must be grounded in the unique material circumstances of a classroom. Compassionate pedagogy arises from the contestation of and collaboration between ways of knowing that, if embraced, can be deeply unsettling and transformative. The experiences described here both incited change in our understanding of our vocation and provided us with a model of negotiation, accommodation and resistance that we have carried beyond the program into other areas of our professional and personal lives. Our encounter with First Nations ways of knowing, both in the King lectures and in a traditional Dakelh pit house, challenged our unexamined assumptions about education and pushed us toward a pedagogy that is flexible, that legitimizes the needs of the whole learner, and that resists an entrenched institutional *paradigm of suffering* by advocating for an alternative one: *the right to be well*.

Keywords: ways of knowing; whole student; first-year students; transformation; wellbeing.

Knowledge emerges only through invention and reinvention, through the restless, impatient, continuing, hopeful inquiry human beings pursue in the world, with the world, and with each other.

Paulo Freire

We stand while a Dakelh Elder welcomes us to Lheidli T’enneh traditional territory. Then our new students sit down with faculty and alumni for a breakfast provided by the First Nations Centre to welcome us all to the IASK Program (Integrated Analytical Skills and Knowledge). The students’ first day at university begins with food and chatter, and the sense that they are entering into a vibrant and dedicated community of learners. What happens over the next 26 weeks is anticipated, but largely unknown. Who we will become emerges from our negotiation of goals, systemic structures, and lived realities. From that sometimes uncomfortable struggle will arise a compassionate pedagogy.

We didn’t design the IASK Program with a pedagogy of compassion in mind; we found it together.

Genesis: The world we grew up in

The University of Northern British Columbia is set in an isolated urban centre in a rural region dependent largely on a resource-based economy. Arising from a grass-roots movement to create capacity and foster a culture of university education ‘*in the north, for the north*,’ UNBC is a small, research-intensive, student-centred institution with a dedicated core faculty, many of whom have been at UNBC from its founding in 1990. Drawing on a vast and varied catchment area, UNBC has a significant proportion of ‘non-traditional’ learners, including mature and First Nations students, many of whom are the first in their families to attend university. It was in this context that the IASK program was born, a first-year curriculum designed to introduce students to the culture of Western scholarship and university life, and to provide them with tools they need to make connections between bodies of knowledge, epistemologies and perspectives. Drawing from the Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences, the integrated curriculum was derived from student-centred goals that include the integration of knowledge fields and fostering strong and supportive learning communities that focus on the ‘whole student’. We aimed to inculcate an epistemological stance that values education as “a social experience that increases one’s ability to make ... meaning so that we go forward more intellectually armed to understand and act in society” (Dewey qtd. in Shor, 1996, p. 62). As students are often unable to make the connections across courses and disciplines required to engage critically with the world beyond the classroom, we aimed to make connections transparent, explicit and relevant.



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In introducing the key question, 'What is scholarship?' and exposing the hidden curriculum, the program aided in the epistemic transition from high school to university by emphasising the students' role in scholarly conversation. Grounded in High Impact Educational Practices as defined by the American Association of Universities and Colleges (Kuh, 2008), IASK featured four highly integrated interdisciplinary 'Big Question' courses supported by two 'Foundation Skills' courses focusing on scholarly practice.

All six courses were co-designed and co-taught by teaching teams that included instructors, teaching assistants, an embedded librarian, and participating student support staff. While the 'Big Questions' courses were each led by faculty from a particular discipline, all were team-taught and intended to cut across and mobilise diverse disciplinary approaches and modes of inquiry. Thus, topics included: Ways of Knowing; People, Place, and Culture; Identity Culture and Change; Understanding Systems in a Complex World; Waves of Globalization; and What is Security? The readings and assignments from these courses were then used in the skills courses based on the question, What is Scholarship? and which also incorporated opportunities for students to reflect on their own learning styles and practices, a key factor in student success.

The cohort-based program emphasised the crucial role played by supportive social and learning communities in students' success and overall wellness, what Rose M. Marra and Betsy Palmer (2008) call a "fertile exosystem for the development of complex epistemological perspectives in students". To achieve this goal, they argue, we must devise pedagogical models that "[connect] courses into a curriculum that synthesizes ways of knowing and doing" (p. 113). Students, we concluded, could not take ownership of their education (in Ira Shor's terms, to see it as something they *do*, rather than something that is *done to them* [1996, p. 10]) unless they were able to "see themselves as capable of constructing knowledge" (Pizzolato, 2008, p. 230). Thus, we worked to shape students' perception of scholarship as a conversation that includes them, not as objects but as active agents, partners in the production of knowledge. This stance requires students to carefully and critically compare and evaluate diverse ways of knowing, perspectives and commitments from a position of respect and open engagement with the new. For us, the best means to this end was to model the collaborative nature of knowledge. Collaboration was not just a method, but a grounding epistemological principle of the IASK program, at all levels and all scales.

It is a beautiful example of pedagogical design grounded in research and best practices. And it became clear pretty quickly that it wasn't going to work as we had planned. It is important to note that the program did not survive the university's subsequent restructuring, but that particular institutional drama is not what we're addressing here. Rather, we are looking at an intrinsic misalignment of philosophy and practice that, once we recognized it, changed our ways of being teacher-learners.

We sought to tackle some of the unwelcome outcomes of the current model of undergraduate liberal arts education: confusion about the relevance of a liberal arts degree in a "fragmented and incoherent educational experience" (AAC&U, qtd in Marra & Palmer, 2008, p. 113) that privileges answer-mining over the understanding that scholarship is a conversation among "essentially contested ideas" (Gallie, 1955) and finally, for many, a sense of loneliness and a reason to abandon higher education. What we discovered, however, was that our brilliant program—a *fait accompli* handed to the students who were expected to 'fit in'—was fraught with the same confusions and resistances we sought to overcome, a contestation between our plans and students' lived reality that was only alleviated when we borrowed a clue from Thomas King's story of Sky Woman and ceased telling and started listening.

A well-designed curriculum was not enough to create the space that the students needed, nor to overcome their learned belief that the enrichment of their minds was to be paid for by the suffering of their bodies and spirits, that, in other words, being 'successful' in university meant to drive the self into ill health. We needed to develop a compassionate pedagogy that would help students – and ourselves – to claim our *right to be well*. We had to expand our understanding of "critical pedagogy" to include this core commitment, which meant flexing against often intransigent institutional structures and creating new stories of learning. Monchinski (2010) argues that "Critical pedagogies are unapologetically *political* pedagogies; they are *engaged* pedagogies. Every critical pedagogy seeks to level its own forms of power toward the creation of alternatives and counter ideologies" (p. 16). We were faced with challenging what Paulo Freire identifies as the positivistic ontology of education that construes the educated individual as "the adapted person" who is "better 'fit' for the world" (Freire qtd in Monchinski, 2010, p. 31). In asking students to fit our program, we found that we were, in Monchinski's terms, potentially supporting oppressive ideologies that "seek to change the consciousness of the oppressed, not the conditions and institutions that oppress them" (p. 31). Over the course of the seven years of the IASK program, there were a number of transformative moments where the necessity for an expanded critical pedagogy was made abundantly clear, when we were asked to take up listening rhetoric, "an exacting task of listening not just to what we each are saying, but to who we each are, and who, together, we are becoming" (Baker, Lee, Dieter, & Dobbins, 2014, p. 29).

In this essay, we describe three of these important moments of listening and the narratives and alternative ideologies that arose from them. In each moment we encountered an intransigent institutional narrative, engaged with an alternative model grounded in acts of listening, and went on to adopt practices aimed at transforming that dominant story. Each one drove home to us the 'Truth About Stories', the recognition that a compassionate pedagogy cannot be constructed in the abstract and imposed from above, but must grow out of the complex interactions of unique individuals in unique spaces. If we are to challenge the positivistic ontology of the 'well-adjusted' student in an a priori world, if we are to make a case for the right to be well, it is our responsibility to create spaces that are safe for our shared discomforts and struggles.

Sky Woman: The world created one conversation at a time

Thomas King's essay, 'You'll Never Believe What Happened', originally delivered as one of the Massey Lectures broadcast on the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation (CBC) radio program, 'Ideas', explores the ways that narratives shape our lives and argues that dominant narratives overshadow other possible paths we might take. He explores three important stories: his own and two stories of



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creation. As the essay begins, King reflects on the challenges that his mother faced after his father abandoned the family. King saw his mother struggle to work in a profession dominated by men and to accept the scripted norm that women should be paid less than men for the same work. And, to make matters worse, King lived with a deep resentment toward his father. For King, these realities shaped and controlled his life: "for there is a part of me that has never been able to move past these stories, a part of me that will be chained to these stories as long as I live" (2003, p. 9).

It is easy to see how our personal stories confine and control us but we are perhaps less aware of narratives that have created dominant paradigms in our culture, politics and institutional practices. It is to these narratives that King turns. His first story is of the woman who fell to earth, often referred to in various First Nations oral traditions as Sky Woman. This First Nations' creation story is about Charm who falls from the sky onto a turtle's back and then works, in cooperation with the animals, to create the earth. King describes this story of creation in vivid detail. We learn how the animals work together to ensure that Charm has a safe place to live. They create the 'beautiful' world with all its light and shadow. In mainstream Western society this story is defined (and devalued) as myth. In our dominate culture, the more powerful story – socially, philosophically and even politically – is the one that King relates in one short paragraph: the Christian Genesis story about Adam and Eve and the God who creates paradise and then expels the inhabitants for disobedience. King argues that this creation story is built on hierarchy and Western ideas of dominance over nature and other people. The Christian narrative, of course, underpins the structure of, among other things, our politics, capitalism, colonialism, and patriarchy. What would the world be like, King asks, if we had chosen another creation story? But, of course, we did not.

Our experience with the Charm story alerted us to the ways that our own design of the course was shaped by the dominant paradigm of Western liberal education that suggests that knowledge is something to be *given* to learners. King emphasises that we live within the consequences of that dominant narrative and the paradigms it describes: "creative power vested in a single deity", a perfect world lost to chaos, and post-garden world with good and evil at its heart and based on competition (King, 2003, p. 24). The alternative model that the Charm story gives us is one of education that supposes that the learner and the facilitator are collaborators in knowledge generation. As Monchinski (2010) explains, "Critical pedagogies challenge positivism's notion that knowledge itself is impartial. Where positivistic epistemology views teachers and students as seekers of knowledge that is fixed and objective, critical pedagogies view teachers and students as co-creators of engaged knowledge" (p. 27). This shift to a more critical pedagogy required us to reorient our understanding of reading as something students do alone for the purposes of 'mining' the 'correct meaning' from a text. Rather, we had to create a living experience of the text.

So, how did that connection between King's story about the power of stories and our expanding understanding of our pedagogical commitments appear to us in class? Curiously, among all the readings we assigned, the Thomas King essay had the most profound impact on the students. The students had been asked to read the essay before class and to write a short abstract to explain King's argument. Most students discovered that they had missed the point of the work and the critical importance of the essay's structure. We invited a Haisla First Nations writer in residence, Eden Robinson, to perform a reading of the essay with the intention that the oral presentation of the story would help students understand the importance of its structure. Eden read the creation story while Tracy read the other parts of the essay. It was important that students were able to hear and experience in time the difference between a dominant narrative that needs no lengthy explanation because that knowledge is assumed, and a counter-narrative that must fully build itself detail by detail into the world. The dominant narrative doesn't have to tell itself. The counter-narrative has to make a space for itself, and cannot assume the listener already knows. Hearing the piece read aloud changed the students' relationship to the work and began our critical discussions about ways of knowing and operations of power. We began to consider how alternative narratives can flex against the constraints of dominant structures. This realisation was our first step toward articulating a compassionate pedagogy. The next took us out of the school altogether.

Encounter: Sky Woman meets the King of Bureaucracy

In the woods behind the University, only a few feet from a popular walking path, there is a traditional Dakelh pit house. From the outside it looks like a mound of dirt and bushes with smoke leaking from a hole in its top. We can descend down this smoke hole into the house along the trunk of a tree carved like stairs, or, alternatively, we can duck in through the doorway in its side, edging down an earthen ramp into the pit itself, where, on this cold October day, the fire is burning in a ring of stones. Log rounds are arranged around the fire and against the log-reinforced dirt walls of the house. Although the ground is a bit muddy outside, inside the room is warm and dim and smells of wood smoke and earth. Our co-teacher, Ross Hoffman, waits for us with a backpack full of snacks that represent the Indigenous peoples of North America. He's cooking salmon over the fire, and his drum is warming against the wall. This is our first visit to the pit house, which was constructed in an experiential learning course overseen by a Dakelh Knowledge Holder, an Elder, a student and two faculty members of the First Nations Studies Department. While he passes around chocolate from Mexico and mint tea from the shores of the lake where he lives, Ross tells us the story of the pit house, and how it became a point of contact between competing ways of knowing, First Nations' and Western, traditional and bureaucratic. In the story of the pit house we found an example of how a compassionate pedagogy might both resist and accommodate, growing within the confines of a dominant paradigm.

The contention began when the course designers sought permission to build the house on University property. The Facilities Department required many forms to be filled out, so that they knew where to locate the power or ethernet outlets, how many window blinds to order, and so on. "It's a pit house," the Knowledge Holder objected. "It doesn't have power outlets." But they filled out the forms, writing NA in the boxes that didn't apply, which was pretty much all of them. Then, it couldn't be done, the designers were



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told, unless they had a building permit. A building permit requires an engineer to draw up a plan. "It's a round circle in the ground with log and dirt sides," the Knowledge Holder objected. "That's the plan." But they wanted to get the course up and running so they hired an engineer who drew up a plan. And work started on the pit house. Then, they were told that for health and safety reasons the entrance to the pit house could not be through the smoke hole. "It's a pit house," the Knowledge Holder objected. "That's how you safely get into a pit house." No, they were told, there needs to be a doorway. So, the design was modified with an eye to greater accessibility and 'health and safety' and the doorway was carved into the pit house's side. And the students continued working on the pit house. Now modified to accommodate its new institutional setting, the pit house was ready to go. No, University said, you need to have an actual door on the doorway, one that can lock. It wouldn't do to have people just going in and out whenever they wanted to. What if some homeless people moved in, squatters, or kids up to no good? "It's a pit house," the Knowledge Holder objected. "It's a place for people to come who need shelter. We're not putting a f**kin' door on that pit house." Behind him, the Elder stood, nodding in agreement.

There is no door on the pit house. People do come and go whenever they want to. It's not exactly, in its physical form, a traditional Dakelh pit house, but it *is* a traditional Dakelh pit house, a place of warmth and hospitality and shelter.

Sitting together in the pit house, munching bitter chocolate and sipping tea while the salmon cooks, we laugh at the absurdity of forms in triplicate that seem so inappropriate to this place, and we admire the Knowledge Holder for his ability to simultaneously accommodate and resist the regulating systems of a dominant narrative. The pit house is a real place that was built on land overlaid with conflicting narratives of power and history, First Nations and settler, material and institutional. In the negotiation of this creation, diverse ways of knowing were grounded in commendable language of safety and care for the 'public': the university was concerned with injury, liability, and the protection of property ("What if someone homeless wants to go in?"); the Knowledge Holder and the pit house builders were concerned with the necessities of shelter ("What if someone homeless wants to go in?"). The words are the same, but coming from different stories, they mean something different. We are reminded of Monchinski's (2010) observation that "Every critical pedagogy seeks to level its own forms of power toward the creation of alternatives and counter ideologies" (p. 16). In his essay, King demonstrates how some stories are considered 'real' and therefore powerful and others can be dismissed as 'myths'. Hegemonic stories invested with institutional power can overwrite counter-narratives. Ross's story of the pit house, however, demonstrated that a crack in the institutional door could lead to an alternative outcome in which contesting stories – sometimes grudgingly and often uneasily – were able to negotiate power and simply do something different. Permissions were not exactly given; something was claimed.

Having moved outside the classroom into this physical space, we opened up a new possibility for understanding. We were, we realised, sitting in the world that Charm made in King's relation of the creation story, in the sense that in this place the abstraction of the engineer's plan and established systems of institutional authority gives way to the work of making a something appropriate to the place and time where we find it. This place is evidence of the capacity for diverse ways of knowing to meet, contend, and converse in real time as the work of creation is being done. The result is something that is not entirely one story or the other but something new, something with its own strong integrity. From this story we learned the significance of encountering and making way for the uniqueness and material necessities that condition any encounter between 'best laid plans' and a living space. We were asked to reconsider what we meant by 'safe learning spaces': safe for whom? Safe for whose stories? Safe for what kinds of power and definitions of human need?

We also found a potential model for ourselves and the story of IASK in the Knowledge Holder's canny conversation with the institutional systems that had difficulty 'seeing' the project except as a series of N/A's on standardized forms. The bureaucracy and systemic imperatives of the institution often made us invisible (N/A) as we tried to build a curriculum that did not 'fit' with the standardised structures and processes of modern liberal education, narratives that were mapped even onto the space provided for learning. We were, for example, locked in a weekly battle with other classes whose participants insisted on rearranging our table-pods, used for collaborative work, back into rows more appropriate to the positivist pedagogy we were attempting to disrupt. Administratively, we struggled to fit our team-teaching model into existing workload structures that could not capture or describe our labour. Each day was a new negotiation that sought to grow a new story within an entrenched existing one.

In the pit house that day in October, we saw how rules and regulations could live side-by-side with the necessity for care. At the end of the day, Ross explained that the song he was about to sing, brought to Canada by an Arapaho healer named Raymond Harris, is traditionally sung by the community of family and friends each evening to support those who are undertaking a fasting ritual. The song, sung by unseen community members to fasters in their lodges, acknowledges that individual spiritual work reciprocally supports the community. We were moved by this image of voices coming from the dark to remind those who are undertaking an important struggle for growth and understanding that they are not alone. In the pit house, we realised that, in order to make a new kind of dwelling in a fraught landscape, sometimes you have to accommodate and sometimes you have to say, "We're not putting a f**kin door on that pit house". In addition to becoming a space for the exploration of the richness of intellectual life, this was what a compassionate classroom could be: shelter for people who are on a journey, a voice to carry them through their struggles to understanding.

But, we were soon to discover, it was important not to dwell only on the abstraction of intellectual quests and contests. A compassionate pedagogy must be grounded in the material health of the learners, the right to be well.



October Day: A conversation

The next moment in our journey happened when we hit the most critical time in the life of an undergraduate: first year in the second week of October. For those universities on a semester system, October is a critical time for retention. Having just discovered where to do laundry and what it is like to live with a noisy, messy roommate, students are shocked to find that their first university mid-terms are upon them. Only six weeks after arriving at university, they are faced with as many as five mid-terms on a wide range of subjects. It is at this time that many students decide to leave higher education, citing the feeling that their studies are 'irrelevant' to the 'real world'. While the IASK program was designed as an integrated program to deal with these issues, we were unprepared for the students' week-six crisis.

It started on a terrible morning. It was 14 October 2014 and we had woken up to the news that there had been a shooting on Parliament Hill in Ottawa, Canada's capital city, in which a soldier had died defending civilians. None of us felt like teaching that day but we arrived at class with brave faces ready to go on. Then Lisa asked: "How is everyone doing?" The problem with a question such as this is that there are two possible outcomes. The first is that everybody lies and says, "OK", and then everything proceeds as normal. Or, someone answers honestly and says, "Terrible!" at which point another two things can happen. First, there is an uncomfortable giggle and then everything returns to normal. Or, someone stops and asks, "Why?" On that day in October, we asked "Why?" We discovered that the 'terrible' they spoke of was connected to a profound sense of uncertainty and anxiety.

We shut the door. The tables and chairs were moved to create a circle. And then the stories started. Some students were sad, some were lonely, some were overwhelmed, some just didn't *get* university, and some just wanted time to breathe. There were a range of stories but the themes were similar and, once they were told, we could not *un-hear* them. We did not teach in the first three hour block that day. We listened to the students' concerns and asked how we might alleviate their stress. We realised in the discussion that the students thought that their experiences were in some ways unique and lonely and in other ways just a regular part of university life. They had been told over and over again that their professors wouldn't care about them and that they would be on their own to figure out how to make the adjustment to higher education. Later in the afternoon, during our third block of class, we took the students outside to the botanical garden. We bought pizza and some drinks and listened to a Massey Lecture on an iPad. After a while the students started talking over the lecture. They told more stories about their lives and we shut off the iPad and listened to them instead.

Both of the experiences described above, the reading of the King story about Sky Woman and the pit house excursion, awoke our thinking about the dominance of paradigmatic narratives of Western thought within our pedagogy, and enabled us to see that our response to this moment of crisis was appropriate. That moment made visible contending definitions of what is 'appropriate' in our institutional context. Our decision to stop teaching and to make space for the students to speak of their discomfort is part of a counter-narrative that challenges the dominant structures of competitiveness and liability that propel classroom dynamics, even if only subconsciously. And to our horror (if not to our surprise) we could not evade the truth that our students actually *expected to be unwell*. Even though we thought we were doing things differently, the students had internalised the narrative that they do not have the right to be well during their studies. They confused the idea of intellectual autonomy with loneliness and isolation. Our institutions have done little to correct the perception that students are somehow *meant to suffer*. When we stopped and listened to the students, we ran up against this *paradigm of suffering*. As Tom Stoppard (1967) so eloquently put it, "All your life you live so close to the truth, it becomes a permanent blur in the corner of your eye, and when something nudges it into outline it is like being ambushed by a grotesque" (p. 39). What was so deeply disturbing in that moment was not only that students were suffering, but that they – and we – believed that this meant that they were 'doing it right' and that our job as teachers was to help them to do it, to 'get them through,' to teach them how to adapt to a system that was making them *unwell*. We had been complicit in reproducing this system of expectations. We were helping them to be 'well adjusted' and were, in Monchinski's terms, changing the students' consciousness about what 'success' looked like, instead of changing the conditions that supported this self-destructive definition. That day, we confronted an established definition of appropriate behaviour and found it to be wanting. We found ourselves using King's words, saying, "You'll never believe what happened..." to our colleagues as we described the transformative events of that day. We needed a new practice. It was then that we decided that we had to shift the paradigm and help the students to claim *the right to be well*, and we realised that, in order to effect such a shift, we had to claim that right for ourselves.

Building a different world

We changed many of our practices, including building in our own autumn reading week when the institution would not, creating wellness inventories for students that provided the opportunity for reflective practices aimed at nurturing the *right to be well*. Recognising the legitimising currency of grades in the system within which we operated, we signaled the significance of such reflective work by including it in our assessment structures; we gave them credit for thinking about wellness. We revised the curriculum in order to reduce the amount of content in favour of opportunities for listening and sharing. In the second term of the program we co-designed the course curriculum *with* the students and asked them to tell us what they needed to know. We gave them the space to find ways to create knowledge in collaboration and they enthusiastically took up the challenge.

We also made the effort to reflect on the remarkable position we were in as co-teachers, as members of a team of educators and support staff. We were a group of white, Western-educated authorities who, in our encounter with Sky Woman, confronted the productively unsettling experience of transformation together with our students and with each other. We ceased thinking of our fevered planning meetings in the hour between classes as a bug of the system and recognised it as a feature, a 'just in time' response to



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what we were listening to in the classroom that allowed us to adjust our practice in the moment. Our new attention to listening and wellness – a commitment that underpinned and challenged the idea of a content-driven curriculum – decreased the weight of expectation and sense of failure that we all have felt when we left a classroom with half of our lesson plan unrealised. The shift to listening and learning, taking time, making the world, like Sky Woman and the animals, with each other, the acceptance of tears and laughter, frustration and joy, accommodation and resistance, helped us to re-envision our vocation. Attending each other's classes, engaging in friendly debate, making the planning and adaptation of the day-to-day classroom experience visible to the students and open to collaboration, we were able to begin to model a way of knowing and being that shifted us away from discourses of 'success' and 'failure' and toward ones of positive struggle, creation and wholeness.

It's yours. Do with it what you will

We wish that we could tell you that our story has a traditional happy ending but alas, you'll never believe what happened: our program did not survive the institutional resistance that is so common in higher education. In the end, they put a figurative door on our pit house and our lovely program came to an end. There were many reasons that IASK did not survive in its original form, but it did live on in new ways. As King (2003) says about those who have heard Sky Woman's story, "It's yours. Do with it what you will... But don't say in the years to come that you would have lived your life differently if only you had heard this story. You've heard it now" (p. 29). Having heard it, we believe we must live our lives differently.

Thus, despite institutional resistances, individual changes ramified beyond those strictures and we each carried with us our compassionate pedagogy into our other courses. Wellness inventories and reflective practice have found their way into our curricula. Students are able to curate their own assessment models. We have reduced the emphasis on cramming content and instead make space for depth and reflection on learning (which, by the way, allows us to cover more content more effectively). We insert a break into the autumn semester to give students some breathing space. In our administrative roles, we resist definitions that support the paradigm of suffering in small and large ways, advocating for wellness and collaborative creation in every space where we have a voice. Sometimes we accommodate the system, and sometimes we hear the voice of the Dakelh Knowledge-Holder affirming that they will not be putting a f**king door on the pit house and we resist, holding out for better, more creative practices and policies.

Each of these practices reflects what we learned from IASK: the capacity for a new narrative to begin to create a new world; the necessity of negotiating a space for that world within the old – to accommodate and to resist; the reorientation of our practice from top-down instruction to collaborative worldbuilding grounded in the unique material circumstances of each classroom and group of students in order to emphasise the right to be well. It's not a tidy process. The right to be well is not just about getting students to eat their vegetables; rather, it is about helping all of us to claim our agency.

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