

Traditional Plant Knowledge of the Tsimshian Curriculum: Keeping Knowledge in the Community¹

Edōsdi/Judith C. Thompson
Prince Rupert, British Columbia

Who I am and where I come from

Dzenēs hoti'e. Tsedze susāhts'an. Edōsdi ushyē.

Good afternoon. My name is Judy Thompson and my Tahltan name is Edōsdi. Robert Quock, a Tahltan Elder, told me that it means “someone who raises up pets and children.” This name is very appropriate as I love animals and children and I am a teacher.

It is very important as a First Nations person to tell who you are and where you are from. My button blanket does that. I am Didene (Tahltan) and my clan is Tseskiye (crow). My crest is Tehkahche (frog), which shows that my grandmother's people are from the Tl'apanotine territory near Luwe Chōn (Iskut, BC). My mother and grandparents are from Tlegohin (Telegraph Creek, BC).

Edōsdi's educational background

My formal Euro-Canadian education began at the age of four. I attended public school for 13 years and then graduated from high school. I then completed a Bachelor of Science degree as well as a professional teaching certificate. Currently, I am working on a Master of Science degree in Environmental Studies at the University of Victoria.

My Master's research has involved my working with Gitga'at people in the Tsimshian community of Hartley Bay. The *Traditional Plant Knowledge of the Tsimshian* curriculum that I developed for the *Forests for the Future* project has been adapted to be used in a high school classroom in the Hartley Bay School. This curriculum is being used as a method, a way for students to learn about their people's ways of knowing, and to be involved in the intergenerational transmission of traditional ecological knowledge and wisdom. I will assess and evaluate the usefulness of incorporating culturally relevant ways of bringing Indigenous knowledge into school science curricula.

My true education started about 15 years ago when I started learning from my grandparents and other Tahltan Elders about who I am as a Tahltan. My Euro-Canadian and Tahltan educations have shaped who I am and have guided me to the career and educational paths I have chosen. I have four roles in my life. I am a student, a teacher, a curriculum developer, and a researcher. Overall, I see myself as a Tahltan woman who

is a learner and an educator. My responsibilities are to learn my people's way of knowing, our language, our traditional ecological knowledge (TEK), and to find ways of passing on this knowledge and wisdom to present and future generations. Using the skills associated with each of my various roles, I want to find ways of bringing Indigenous knowledge into curriculum that is both meaningful and relevant. It is in my capacity as a curriculum developer that I want to find ways to bring TEK into school science curriculum. I believe this is one way we can make science more relevant and accessible for our children. In addition, I want to discover effective ways of passing on our knowledge to our children and to share with students the ways that our people learn and the ways in which knowledge and wisdom were transmitted between generations. I want to use this information in our schools because I find that the way we are teaching science does not seem to be working as effectively as it could be.

Building Relationships with First Nations communities

When working within a First Nations community as a researcher and/or as a curriculum developer, it is important to build a strong working relationship and partnership and to be respectful, honest and sincere. It is also important to balance the ethical protocols of the academic world with that of cultural protocols of First Nations communities. In regards to both Tsimshian and Tahltan communities, I will be carrying out what Maori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (1999) refers to as Insider/Outsider Research. While most research methodologies have assumed that the researcher is an outsider able to observe objectively, Smith states that, "Indigenous research approaches problematize the insider model in different ways because there are multiple ways of both being an insider and outsider in indigenous contexts" (p. 137). In regards to working with the communities of Gitxaala and Hartley Bay, I am an outsider, even though I am First Nations, have grown up on Tsimshian territory, and have either gone to school with, have been a teacher of, or have friendships with many Gitxaala and Hartley Bay people. I have visited and/or worked with classes at the schools in Hartley Bay and Gitxaala and I am also a First Nations role model for the School District No. 52 role model program. Overall, I have been building relationships with Tsimshian communities and Tsimshian people for most of my life.

My relationship with Telegraph Creek and Iskut is much more complex. My mother and my maternal grandparents were born and raised in Telegraph Creek, and my grandmother's people are from Tlepanotine, near Iskut, BC. I have been returning to my peoples' homeland for over a decade, and have slowly built a relationship with my people. I realize that I am still an outsider on many levels, and so I have tried to be what Smith (1999) has called "the 'seen face,' which conveys the sense that being seen by the people—showing your face, turning up at important cultural events—cements your membership within a community in an ongoing

way and is part of how one's credibility is continually developed and maintained" (p. 15). Even though I am First Nations I cannot just show up in a First Nations community and say, "Here I am. I am going to do research." Even in my own Tahltan communities, I must build up that trust.

The Responsibility of Returning Knowledge and Results to Communities

Members of First Nations communities understand the importance of being part of a community prior to commencing research with a community. First Nations people have often felt that academic researchers, especially non-Aboriginal, have taken advantage of them by taking their knowledge and then leaving without giving anything back to the community. Here is a really important quote from one of my Tahltan Elders, Loveman Nole, in which he is talking about a conversation he had with a non-Aboriginal researcher who was working in Iskut.

I said, "I don't mind if my cousin Judy right here talking to me. She's a Tahltan and I'm a Tahltan. Them things I tell her will stay right here. But if I tell you that, it will be gone. Where you go it will go with you and we'll never get nothing back." That's true, you know. I did it for four people, I never got nothing back. (Loveman Nole, Tahltan Elder, personal communication, 2001)

It is really important that the information, the knowledge and the wisdom that we learn from the Elders and our community members stays in our community and does not get taken away. This project has attempted to do this by having curriculum developed based on the knowledge and wisdom of Gitgala Elders and community members.

Traditional Plant Knowledge of the Tsimshian Curriculum

I have developed a unit plan based on the traditional plant knowledge of North Coast Aboriginal Peoples. All of the lessons rely on the knowledge and wisdom of the Elders and community members and the involvement of students, which is very important to me.

The unit plan is made up of six lessons. The first three lessons are based on the development of a plant booklet. Students research traditional uses of plants from both primary sources, such as Elders and community members, and secondary sources, such as books, the internet, and other media. They go on a school field trip, hopefully accompanied by Elders, and observe and photograph plants in their natural habitat. They then collect plant samples, identify them, press and mount them. Once this is done, students bring all of the knowledge that they have learned, all of the images and plant samples that they have accumulated, and create a plant booklet. This booklet will be presented to the community at a gathering, such as a feast, to thank and honour the Elders and community members who have shared their knowledge and wisdom and taught them about their people's traditional uses of plants. By having students learn from their own people, it makes learning about science more relevant, but also

allows students to see their Elders and community members as experts. One of the important outcomes of the lessons is to get the students to become the researchers; researchers who explore their own lives so that they can connect their own lived experience with that of their community members. Ann Egan-Robertson (1998) has stated,

The students' ethnographic research can be viewed as a kind of "native anthropology" ... Rather than exporting knowledge of a community for use by others, ethnographic research becomes a way for people to reflect on their own communities by developing a better understanding of the cultural dynamics in which they live. (p. 282)

In summary, this is what the first three lessons are based on. The fourth lesson looks at a specific type of plant, the berry, and the many different ways of harvesting, preserving, and storing this important food. Again, this lesson relies on the knowledge and wisdom of Elders and community members. Students will learn about the different methods of preservation and storage of berries in a hands-on manner; they will dry the berries in the sun either whole or as cakes, and they will preserve berries in grease and/or water. They will also examine the reasons why certain berries were preserved or stored in different ways by looking at the time of year they were harvested and testing their pH level to look for relationships. The fifth lesson focuses on nutrition and how North Coast Aboriginal peoples fulfilled and continue to fulfill their nutritional requirements with their traditional foods. The final lesson deals with the relationship North Coast Aboriginal peoples had and continue to have with neighbouring Aboriginal groups, focusing on the types plants that may have been traded.

Assisting Science Teachers

There are many reasons why non-Aboriginal teachers do not include traditional ecological knowledge in science curriculum. One reason is that they feel that they shouldn't since they are not Aboriginal. In addition, many do not know how to get started or how to go about bringing Indigenous knowledge into science. Another reason is that many science teachers do not feel that traditional ecological knowledge is science. However, I believe that this material is an important way of making science relevant. I am hoping to help science teachers understand that they do not need to be the expert to teach these lessons; instead, they can trust their students and let the students become the experts by learning from their own people. It is hoped that this curriculum will assist Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal teachers in finding ways of bringing traditional knowledge and curriculum into their science classroom.

Conclusion

This unit plan was based on Aboriginal students learning from their Elders and valuing their people's knowledge and wisdom about nature. These lessons were developed in a way that students would be able to

view their own knowledge and the knowledge and wisdom of their Elders and community as both valid and valuable in the context of science, and more generally, to all academic work. It was also a way for such learning to be brought into school classrooms. "The idea of students as researchers who explore their own lives and connect academic information with their own lived experience is alien to many schools" (Steinberg & Kincheloe, 1998, p. 13). It is vital that Aboriginal students realize that their people's understanding of the world, their worldview, and their understanding of natural phenomena is as valid as Western modern science. They need to know that science is not only found in textbooks because these materials do not usually include the worldview, experiences, and knowledge and wisdom of their people. If school science curricula can find ways of bringing in traditional ecological knowledge, a body of knowledge and wisdom that has largely been ignored in regards to its contributions to science, without appropriating it, hopefully science can become more accessible and relevant to a group of students that have been underrepresented in science classes and science related careers.

Meduh! (Thank you!)

Note

¹This oral presentation was made by Judy Thompson as part of a panel on First Nations curriculum development at the Society for Applied Anthropology Meetings in Portland, Oregon, March 2003. Judy Thompson was a member of the curriculum development team of the *Forests for the Future* project.

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