

The world as co-teacher: Learning to work with a peerless colleague

Abstract:

This paper focuses on the stories of two aboriginal people who in their own particular ways have taught us a tremendous amount. Through sharing their stories we will work towards supporting our claim suggest that the world as co-teacher can be understood as being more than just a metaphor. The paper extends this discussion into the work of philosophers Martin Buber and Benedictus Spinoza adding another layer to the compost pile are building. We end this discussion by suggesting a series of implications that result with regard to teaching, learning, and possibly beyond that are a result of this seeming minor shift from the other-than-human-world as backdrop for education to active co-teacher for our students and even ourselves.

If all the world's a stage, then it is one on which metaphor can be made to act, almost at will, and in almost every scene...just as this one is doing. Allowing metaphor to speak can be a direct line to meaning. We aver its usefulness and praise its value, yet we also think that sometimes what is too comfortably permitted to pass as figurative meaning—for the act of figuration may allow the easy translation of complex ideas—may mask much more difficult, sometimes contrary, literal interpretations. In this paper, we advocate resisting our comfortable tendency to construe what is difficult to fathom as metaphorical. In the cases we examine, the stories of First Nations people provide an insight into how the world as co-teacher may be more than an apt metaphor. We wish to work towards the idea that “the world as co-teacher” may be literally interpreted, and that ecological learning requires the involvement of this peerless colleague. In the stories that follow, we mention numerous ways this teacher could be called on.

If one accepts as a starting point that the other-than-human (*Othu*) world¹ is a co-teacher, then the role of teacher, as we construct and know it in modern western culture, may also alter somewhat as a result of the argument we make here. If both *Othu* and human are to be considered teachers then, according to this categorization, broad guidelines must apply to both. If they do not, then there is no use in combining the two, erstwhile different concepts, under one roof/sky. We shall see if the attempt is worth this revisiting of the idea.

¹More personally, we give the name *Othuw* (“Oth-ewe”) to the other-than-human world. We use this as a proper noun, in order to accord similar status as that we accord to a person. *Mothu* we use to replace “more than human.” The personified proper noun is *Mothuw*.

Co-teaching

We begin by literally interpreting the world as co-teacher. How do capable co-teachers work together? What does this look like? In general, good co-teachers listen to each other; we plan together; we agree on how a certain lesson or learning experience will fit in the overall arc of a course. Ideally, our shared teaching occurs within the context of a relationship of mutual respect and intellectual interdependence that precedes our teaching time and continues beyond it. Why would we teach with this person were this not the case? If we think of times we have been forced to teach with someone when our underlying values differed, we know what a strain this can be. So, we need to know and respect each other first. We need to listen to the other, to allow ourselves to be changed by them. We need to be open to the possibility of reciprocity, from which we hope to create the same-shaped but larger space within which our students will learn with us. We need to listen, to give, to listen again. We need to have full trust that the co-teacher will contribute when they are most experienced, will listen well, perhaps administer, pull back, when students need to contribute or when we do. We need to be able to trust that the other will respect the conditions of co-interaction, and that we will do the same.

In order to plan together, we need to hear the perspectives of our co-teacher. We need to feel the possibility of real difference. We need to attend to and eliminate what might be distractions. We need to honestly challenge situations in which we disagree. We need to recognize our strengths and those of our co-teacher and more importantly, with humility, acknowledge our own limitations. But most of all, in our relationship with our co-teacher, we need to be the teaching in which we want to be immersed. We need to teach as we would learn. We need to create the way of teaching that meets our mutual interpretation of learning. Within this, we need to be filled with trust, to relish in the play that is learning, and to share this with our students.

We think that all of these considerations apply to teaching with Othuw. Leaving aside the inevitable charge of anthropomorphism—which species claimed teachers had to be human, anyhow?—we will note these considerations in more detail later. But first, perhaps it is useful to hear one case in which one teacher let the world teach, without constraint.

Donna

Sean, author one, tells the following story:

There have been times in my life when I have encountered something so powerful, so complex, and so humbling that the moment has stayed

with me. These moments have tended to defy easy explanation, or I have not had the language or system of understanding to draw them into my pre-conceived frames. This disjuncture has often led these moments to act as a kind of burr under the saddle of my comfortable understandings and I find myself needing to scratch, wiggle, and pick at the offending spot until I find a way to explain or even discard it. The moment I will describe below is one of those and by remaining with the discomfort it caused to my concepts of teaching and learning I have been forced to change, quite significantly, my ideas about myself, education, and the more-than-human world.

About fifteen years ago, when I was working with Outward Bound, I was witness to what I can only describe as a transforming experience for a young woman, named Donna.² She was an adolescent participant in an all-Native group I was ostensibly leading, and we were on a three-week paddling trip through a swath of Northern Ontario. The group was challenging, made up of 10 young people all considered “at-risk”. The students came from several different First Nations in Ontario (Six Nations, Cree, and Anishinaabe) and had very mixed living experiences. Half were still living with biological parents on reserves while the other half were with adoptive parents or in the care of social services and living in larger, predominantly non-native, centers. Donna came to the group bearing traces, both internally and externally, of tremendous scarring. She had been shuttled throughout the “system” and had suffered deeply. She resembled a late-fall maple leaf, fragile, buffeted by her environment, and physically and mentally, curled in on herself. There was very little life left, and what was left was easily crushed. Donna tended to be quite withdrawn, and in the group setting her body would curl itself up, trying to disappear, shutting off and protecting herself from the outside world, the source of pain. She had many inch-long scars running along the inside of both arms from her wrists to mid-biceps indicating a systematic process of self-abuse, and a clear sign of a person calling out for help or for whom blood, pain, and fear is the best, the only, reminder of being alive.

For the first two weeks, until the beginning of the “solo experience”, Donna remained detached, self-protective, her personal pain almost palpable. The “solo experience” is designed as an opportunity for the students to test their recently learned skills but, more profoundly, it is a chance for them to be alone with themselves immersed in the non-human world without all the trappings and distractions of our modern

² Donna is a pseudonym.

society; it is a component of the Outward Bound program that often has deep, educative value. For some students “solo” can be the most difficult time they have ever spent. Others discover they are just not comfortable alone. It could be because they are deeply communal, or they define themselves solely through interactions with other people, or they dislike who and what they are and while on solo, what normally distracts them from themselves is absent. Or it could be that they don’t know what to do. On the other hand, I have seen students for whom this experience is wonderfully positive, a chance to reflect, to self-examine, to discover what they know or don’t know about themselves’ gaining strength through the process. For yet others the experience is neutral. Nothing seems to occur except that they are able to complete the practical project and move on. Whatever their reaction to the situation, the students are not actually alone when they are on solo. They are certainly away from other people, but they are in fact immersed in the wilderness, completely surrounded by it.

For Donna, the solo experience was to spend three days on her own small island from which she could see my campsite, if she so wished. This also allowed me to check on her without intruding on her solitude. On the evening of pick-up I paddled over to the island. The sun was at my back and sinking low in the sky, and the world had that translucent feel of a late summer evening. As I approached I could not see Donna, but there was a small pile of her belongings sitting next to the shore. She must have been waiting for me back in the forest because, as I landed, she came out and walked towards me. At first, I did not recognize her. The setting sun was shining directly on her, and yet she seemed to have a glow of her own. She was taller, more comfortable (at ease), and more alive than I had ever seen her. She seemed to have gone through a complete change of persona. For this moment anyway she was not turned into herself, exuding pain and distrust; she was a spring leaf fully unfurled and open to what world had to offer. She radiated strength, courage, and hope, and I realized that something had happened to her on this solo experience. Whether she realized this or not, I don’t know, but I do know that I almost paddled away and left her in that place, not wanting to disturb what was possibly the first time in Donna’s life of safety, belonging and learning. It was both a humbling and awe-inspiring moment, I observed a change in Donna during that solo experience that was truly significant, and that it had very little to do with me as a teacher.

This planted a burr. How was it that this place, this experience could help, even teach, Donna to feel safe, to unfurl, to come into her own? I have since come to the realization that the transformation of Donna

did not occur as a result of my, or any human's, intervention, or best-laid plans, or active mediation and interpretation. It is, I believe, an example of the direct encounter between an individual and the wilderness where the more-than human world embraces the learner and provides opportunities for learning, as any good teacher might.

In this event, the world was allowed to be teacher, unencumbered. You might say that Sean recognized his co-teacher was on a roll, and knew enough not to hinder it. To try to intervene would have been to reduce the experience to a cumbersome translated event in which the human co-teacher would have belaboured and potentially impeded what was learned. Many of us have witnessed this distasteful spectacle in which a teacher, perhaps ourselves, required by her adherence to some antique law to “teach to a curriculum” meets her obligations to her administrator and loses her soul in the same moment—one of insipid, wasted mistranslation of depth of meaning into trivialized ignorance. What direct meaning might have once existed is destroyed in the tactless pursuit of molding meaning into curricularly discernable shape. Sean’s near decision to leave Donna by the water illustrates the opposite. He was unwilling to interfere with his co-teacher, even to the extent of wanting to extend the lesson when time was up. He recognized true pedagogical brilliance when he saw it and let Othuw run.

Philosophical interpretations of the peerless co-teacher

Michael Paul

The words of Michael Paul, a Temi-Augami Anishinaabe elder³, give some perspective on how the world might teach.

You wake up
and you have no game plan
and you just go out

maybe you want to paddle
down the lake today

or go up the river
go down the river

³ Michael Paul is a Teme Augami Anishinaabe elder. He spoke with Chris, author two, in the course of making the film, *Dakin Menan*. This is a documentary film arguing for the preservation of old growth forests near a sacred site in the Temagami area, Chiskon-Abikong.

but no matter how you feel
it's you

this land is telling you
what to do

In this conversation, Michael Paul was commenting on how decisions are made in conjunction with the Mothuw. We have earlier quoted these words in the context of elaborating a state of being and way of knowing consistent with a position in an ecosystem in which self and place co-create meaning, and in which the worth of the ecosystem gains priority over individual human being. We have called the state of being *attentive receptivity* and the way of knowing, *meander knowing*.⁴ In this context, the words illustrate a way of being in the world such that the world is listened to...as one might, a beloved teacher. There is no doubt for us that Michael was describing a particular way of being in the world that is different from the one occupied by those of us in Modwestcult⁵. In this state of being, knowing occurs differently. For Michael, knowing in this state is tantamount to listening to what the land is telling you. In other words, the human finds their niche within the larger system. They come into one of the roles they naturally do well, that of interlocutor for and with the will of an ecosystem. For those of us used to powering, in an alienated way, through the world with our own will dominant, and coming from a culture in which this mode of being is lauded and even required, this might sound odd.

It might be claimed that this discussion is romantic or incomplete, the listening metaphor being a broad one at best. But, as we have earlier described (2009), it seems particularly significant that Michael was speaking utterly literally, and that his words made best sense in a literal context. In other words, Michael sometimes occupies a state of being such that the land becomes teacher and interlocutor.

This has been our experience as well, although perhaps to a lesser extent. Both of us return to wild spaces to “recharge.” But to put it this way is perhaps to diminish the effect. I (Chris, author two) just spent a day at the farm, in “meaningful work.” But these words are now used in the fashion of a trivializing cliché. I mean by this at least two things. The first meaning has to

⁴ To explore these discussions in more depth see: Beeman, C. & S. Blenkinsop. 2009. Might Diversity also be Ontological? Considering Heidegger, Spinoza and Indigeneity in Educative practice. *Encounters on Education*, 9 (Fall 2008), 95-107.

Beeman, C. & S. Blenkinsop. 2008. Dwelling Telling: Literalness and Ontology. *Paideusis*, 17 (1), 13-24.

⁵ Modern western culture. We like the cultish emphasis of the abbreviation.

do with exploratory locating of purpose that is situated in its doing—a little like the sense that Michael Paul spoke of. I always let the farm speak to me and tell me what it wants done. Part of my work is directing attention not to what appears to be my will-directed intent, but to something I broadly construe as the farm. My will is given over to place as I listen, and my still intent functions, but does not dominate. In this way, I often work at different tasks than I thought I would. But I also mean that this work that has meaning for my corporeal enclosure—my body. I will later eat, in the form of food, the labour I contributed today, thus participating in an unalienated loop consisting of my labour's integration with the world and the world's integration with the caloric/chemical/electric processes that contribute to physical existence. When this unintermediated relationship with living is experienced and understood, meaning making extends beyond intellectual, academic or scholastic. At the farm, I work in the presence of a peerless teacher.

I (Sean) just spent 5 days in the Grand Canyon, a place I have been multiple times before. The desert has, for me, a subtle touch as teacher. Small whispers from lives lived in intimate inter-reliance offer complex stories, examples to be followed. Humility learned under the gaze of vastness, energy conserved with each movement well calculated, and rare and random windows of opportunity taken when presented. One is taught to act when the acting is good and to not-act when not-acting is better. And yet, held upon the open palm of the earth and facing lessons potentially hard won, there is also acceptance, forgiveness, gentleness, and even love. It comes in the wind that dies down in the evening, in the eight inch cut-throat trout suspended in a pool barely three times its size, and in a sense of embrace and aliveness, born of rising, like the trout, to the challenge of the canyon, that reminds us, as only the best of teachers can, that we are unique, special, and that we can indeed.

Thus, sometimes, both of us interact with the more-than-human world in ways that cannot be described as “using” the world. To describe it thus is to miss the—at least as it is phenomenologically perceived—direct, egalitarian interaction with it, in which meaning appears to be co-created with an active, present and “intending” other. Again, words must fail, but judging by the sense we have in wilder—less human dominated—places, the nature of the interaction is as with a much greater other. Only our attachment to western pedagogy causes us to dare to describe it as an equal. An equal co-teacher is its gentler representation to us. And to describe our living in wilder places as “using” is to defile what feels sacred. We would as soon diminish the relationship with a respected co-teacher.

Buber

There is an echo of this discussion in the work of Martin Buber. Early in his most famous work *I and Thou* Buber begins a new section with the sentence, "I consider a tree".⁶ From there Buber continues adopting, intriguingly, a more lyric, poetic style ...

I can look on (a tree) as a picture: stiff column in a shock of light, or splash of green shot with the delicate blue and silver of the background.

I can perceive it as movement: flowing veins on clinging, pressing pith, suck of the roots, breathing of the leaves, ceaseless commerce with earth and air - and the obscure growth itself.

I can classify it in a species and study it as a type in its structure and mode of life.

I can subdue its actual presence and form so sternly that I recognize it only as an expression of law...

I can dissipate it and perpetuate it in number...
In all this the tree remains my object, occupies space and time, and has its nature and constitution.

It can, however, also come about, if I have both will and grace, that in considering the tree I become bound up in relation to it. The tree is no longer It. I have been seized by the power of exclusiveness. (Smith, 1958, 19-20)

Thus, Buber is offering us series of possible kinds of encounters, relationships, one might have with a particular tree, however, and this is pivotal to Buber's work on dialogue and relationship, all of these examples fall into his relational category I/It. This is the objective relationship, the site of the monological, the position from which the other "remains my object". None of these represent the I/Thou relationship he is exploring throughout this book. But then something happens to Buber's description he suggests that there is another kind of relationship possible with this tree and we get an

⁶ The word "consider" is from R. Smith's translation. W. Kaufman replaces it with the word "contemplate" in his later translation. However, Smith's translation remains the more popular and in this instance at least we believe the more correct for there appears to be a separation implied in the act of contemplation, versus that to which one gives consideration, that we understand Buber to be intentionally trying overcome.

inkling of the I/Thou.⁷ Most germane to this discussion comes in two stanzas farther down ...

The tree is no impression, no play of my imagination, no aspect of a mood; it confronts me bodily and has to deal with me as I must deal with it – only differently.

One should not try to dilute the meaning of the relation: relation is reciprocity. (Kaufman, 1996, p.58)

Thus, Buber begins by explicitly suggesting that the tree is not a metaphor as it were. It is literally⁸ actively confronting me from its own being when we encounter each other in dialogue. A relation of equals, of reciprocity, and yet, as we read further into Buber's educational writings⁹ we get this sense that as with the asymmetry of the teaching relationship he talks in depth about¹⁰ there is a similar asymmetry between us and Othuw.

Some good news is that the asymmetry of the relationship we haltingly call equal has some real bearing on the nature of the relationship we, as teachers, may have with our students. In our relationship with students, we are called on to leave the same space, the same possibility for relationship, as is afforded us by Othuw. For Buber, there is a sense of a teacher who waits patiently, arms extended, offering the possibility of relationship whenever a student chooses to turn into it. The student has, whether they are aware of it or not, the simultaneous offer of possibility and an implicit background of protection. In an interesting parallel, while we make some contribution to Othuw, we do so in her shadow. We are in the presence of someone who is greater than we are, and this is known to both of us. Our students are, structurally, in a position of vulnerability to us. We are more

⁷ For a more extensive discussion of will, grace and the I/Thou relationship see: Blenkinsop, S. 2005.

Martin Buber: Educating for Relationship. *Ethics, Place, and Environment*, 8(3). 285-307.

⁸ In the German Buber uses the word *leibt* and as Kaufmann points out so clearly in his footnote (p. 58) "*Leib* means body; *leibt* is most unusual and means literally: it bodies – across from me or vis-à-vis me." Thus, we hear Buber using an unusual and active form of the word

⁹ See his essays Education and the Education of Character in: Buber, M. 1968. *Between Man and Man*, (R.G. Smith, trans.). New York: MacMillan.

¹⁰ See: Blenkinsop, S. 2005. Martin Buber: Educating for Relationship. *Ethics, Place, and Environment*, 8(3). 285-307.

responsible for them than they are for us. So, in our relation to the peerless Othuw, we learn how to treat others as we would like to be treated ourselves.

Spinoza

In Spinoza's cosmology, there is only one substance. Everything, and every thought that forms the *All-that-is*, which Spinoza called *Nature*, and sometimes *God*, is inherently related because it is made up of—and motivated, if you will—by the same stuff—Substance.

Spinoza identifies three distinct ways of knowing in *The Ethics* (Spinoza, 2000). He calls these three ways of knowing *imagination*, *reason* and *intuition*. Each of these terms is used in a specialized way by Spinoza. Briefly, *imagination* refers to empirical knowledge. It is a knowledge of particular events. *Reason* refers to theoretical knowledge. This is the kind of knowing that derives from an informed understanding of things. It is a theoretical knowledge that, because it is based on generalization, knows the general without knowing the particular.

But *intuition*, or *scientia intuitiva*, the third way of knowing, knows both the particular and the general, and does so without the use of reason. Spinoza's *intuition* is an insight that shows the relationship of the particular to the whole. It is our position also that Spinoza's third way of knowing implies a way of being.

This is because this kind of thinking -- with "the knowledge of the union which the mind has with the whole of Nature"—not merely describes an actual position of interconnectedness with Being, one that is guaranteed by Spinoza's metaphysics, but *enacts* a consciousness of it. In other words, this knowledge shapes the being of the person differently. It can only occur through a person who not only *is* in the world in a particular way—Spinoza would say that all of us are—but *inhabits* it (that is to say, does so knowingly) in this way.

Perhaps the kind of knowing Michael Paul engages in, as described in the earlier quotation could be understood, from a Western perspective, in this way. When Michael goes to listen, he is listening, as with Yeats, to his beloved Lake Isle, *at his deep heart's core*. But he is also listening to a part of himself—because he is, Spinoza-like, part of All-that-is—that has become interwoven with him through a certain kind of life lived, not just by him, but by his ancestors. What interests us is not so much that he might understand the world in a way that corresponds with Spinoza's *intuitive*, but rather, that this kind of learning, with which he seems so comfortable and which is so compatible with a Spinozan metaphysics, might indicate, even require, the need for Othuw as co-teacher.

Could it be that this listening state, is one of the things learning is, for Michael Paul? That this is learning, receiving teachings, being educated.

Perhaps, listening to this teacher is one of the things that Donna did. What are the qualities of this kind of learning? It is a deep listening state. It is generated by the interests of the person, but with a consciousness of the welfare of the whole. It is receptive. These qualities might be central to the learning of some Aboriginal people. But we think they are compatible with many practices recognized as effective in Western education—practices like place-based learning, outdoor and experiential education, inquiry based learning, individually directed study, and narrative learning.

Now, recall the words of Michael Paul that we started with:

It's you; this land is telling you, what to do.

Both Spinoza and Michael Paul appear to be describing going through the world with a pervasive sensibility of the inherent interconnectedness of all things. In some obvious ways we begin to see Spinozean metaphysics and Aboriginal cosmology, as expressed earlier by Michael Paul, come into alignment. During time spent with Elders I have often heard reference to, not merely a person, but a deer person, a bear person, a tree person. Here “person”, takes the place of “being.” In this view, different “persons” appear to be acting as different forms—in Spinoza terms, modes—of All-that-is. The underlying notion of interconnection is expressed in the common noun “person” that is used for all things. This linguistic shift both reflects and shapes a world view that considers different modes of All-that-is as having, if not equal ethical merit, at least an ethical standing. This ethical and ontological standing extends also to the world that we in modern western culture would not think of as a living one. Thus, the concept of rock is necessarily infused with the notion of its inherent worth or standing as a being. As a mode of being that has some kind of shared composition with oneself, there is always the potential for an interaction with it. Thus, a “spirit rock” is not so very far removed from everyday modes of thinking and being. It is not an awkward stretch of imagination to consider this equal other as also teacher.

How to work with a peerless co-teacher

In our shared teaching experiences with Othuw, we have found all of the qualities that we need in a co-teacher in abundance. Our challenge lies in not interfering with our excellent partner when learning is occurring. It's hard, as humans, to do that which Othuw appears to do so easily. Perhaps it is best not to try to emulate or interfere but to recognize those skills that are available. In many cases, Othuw is the better teacher. Accept it. Lean on her. Learn when what she is saying cannot be understood by students. Know when to interpret and when to intervene. Recognize what presents itself as her temper. Know that she is the most fair of any teacher, but sometimes, the

most brutally blunt. As we earlier intoned, the relationship with Othuw before teaching begins will strongly influence the success of the teaching.

And for those who like lists:

We think the preceding ideas might lead to the following “actions”:

In general, we think that the best way for the other than human world to be permitted to teach is to allow students direct interaction with it. That is, allow your co-teacher to be present while teaching. This translates into allowing students to be in the more-than-human world while learning.

We think affording at least equal time to the co-teacher is requisite. Because Othuw does not speak in human words, this translates into leaving ample time for experiences, often in silence, directly with Othuw.

A strong, ongoing relationship with Othuw is necessary for the co-teaching to go well. This translates to spending time with Othuw. The relationship with your co-teacher is built over time. Its strength will affect how well the teaching goes.

In the relationship with a co-teacher, we also need to spend time in the other’s company in reflecting on how the teaching went. We need to listen to what the other has felt about the shared learning, to see how things could have gone better. We need to restore our own relationship with that teacher in order that the “dynamic equilibrium” of our relationship *apart from work with students* continues. In other words, we need to spend time in each others company.

Concluding

At the beginning of this paper, we wrote that if we are to seriously treat Othuw as literal co-teacher, then the role of teacher might be altered. We think this modification is consistent with the broad notion of teacher as we now use it, but there are some differences. In practice, what we have said about the relationship with co-teacher applies. But it is not a relationship of equals. This is because we feel that we learn much more from Othuw than she does from us. This is said in consciousness of the role humans are seen to play by various Indigenous people, that is, of being the vehicles through which the world is perceived, giving something like “consciousness” to the world. Despite this one thing that humans really can do well—the bringing of consciousness to what Spinoza would call Nature—the All-that-is—the relationship we experience when working with Othuw is that peerlessness. We are fresh green teachers.

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