Embodying Experiential Learning: Cultivating Inner Peace in Higher Education

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Abstract
This paper presents a reflection on experiential teaching and an experiment in embodied learning for peacebuilders and changemakers. The theories, practices and experiments are part of a postgraduate course in Peace of Mind, offered at the University of Sydney. The intention of this course is to invite the reader to see experiential learning and awareness-based practices as tools that enable the possibility to evolve our humanness. Interdisciplinary abstract methodologies from Indigenous and phenomenological philosophies support the argument that granular and qualitative knowledge emerges through the embodiment of human expression. It addresses the concept of fragmentation of the self, the importance of pausing and giving voice to knowledge that words cannot convey. Through the arts, the paper shows non-linear forms of communication with visual experiments. The purpose of this collaborative work is in the craft, the process, and beyond the authorship.
Keywords
experiential learning, Indigenous wisdom, consciousness, social arts, embodiment, inner peace, peace of mind, higher education.

Introduction
How do you teach and assess learning which does not rely only on cognitive, intellectual knowledge but also experiential and embodied experience? This paper presents a process in experiential teaching and an experiment in embodied learning in which enabling and embracing different types of human expression in higher education was both encouraged and accepted. This experiment came about as part of the opportunity to redesign the postgraduate unit of study Peace of Mind: The Psychology of Peace, a core unit of the Master of Peace and Conflict Studies at the University of Sydney, Australia. Peace builders and changemakers who work in development and security, choose peace and conflict studies for its interdisciplinary approach. Is epistemological analysis based on disciplinary theories enough to understand the implications of reproducing the development, peace, and security that we want to see globally? The authors of this article believe it is not. This paper argues that students who learn only through cognitive and linear reasoning will not be equipped to solve complex structural conflicts. Peace and conflict, along with peace and security, conflict transformation and conflict resolution studies will need to include abstract concepts to work with the inner self through experiential and embodied learning.

The quality of outcomes for people depends on the inner place from which they operate (Scharmer, 2016). Merleau-Ponty suggests that coherence originates from the inner experience (2014, p. 58). But “what do we know about that inner place?” (Scharmer, 2016, pp. 27–28). The intention to redesign the course departed from the premise that to know ontological peace and security—an inner sense of feeling peace and safety—requires experiential learning to experiment with the granular quality of emotions. Theory U, an awareness-based systems approach that “makes a system sense and see itself” (Scharmer, 2018, p. 17), was used for the redesign of the course in order to discern qualitative knowledge. As humans evolved, new technologies offered greater power; but as power grew, wisdom was left behind (Senge, et al. 2004, p. 187). If we are to embody a new perspective on peace and security, this paper argues that it is necessary to incorporate experiential awareness-based practices and dive deeply into both philosophical and phenomenological approaches on experiential consciousness. Inspired by abstract methodologies from Indigenous wisdom and phenomenological philosophies, the course was redesigned to better understand

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1 The possibility to redesign Peace of Mind: The Psychology of Peace emerged from a project led by Wendy Lambourne with Vivianna Rodriguez Carreon focused on curriculum transformation intended to enhance collaborative and interactive learning associated with an authentic assessment.
how self-expression through the social arts can contribute to a more holistic and coherent understanding of peace.

This paper is a collaborative work. It is based both on Vivianna Rodriguez Carreon’s input, when she was invited as the new teacher and co-coordinator for the course taught during the first semester in 2020, and a reflection on the course content and assessment experiment from a student, Penny Vozniak. The Peace and Conflict Studies program attracts students who aim to work with vulnerable people in the context of direct or structural violence. Initially, the unit of study had two different groups, face-to-face and online classes. But after four weeks, like many others, the country went into lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic, and the rest of the semester was delivered online for both groups. At this time, holding a safe space felt essential while engaging with complex topics that were part of the curriculum. Rodriguez Carreon and Carrillo acknowledge that when applying awareness-based practices it is critical to bring “responsibility to hold the space and enable difficult conversations” (2021, p. 125). Students were encouraged to reflect on their lived experiences through awareness-based practices in order to connect with the meaning of inner and outer peace.

The Unit of Study curriculum was divided into twelve teaching modules and two workshops. This paper aims not to analyze in detail the course structure, but rather to focus on the content and approaches that the two authors experienced in teaching and learning. The redesign of this course was aligned with the University’s learning, teaching, research and engagement programs to support cultural competence education by including interdisciplinarity and Indigenous knowledge. One of the assignments relied on abstract methodologies; it was the results of this new kind of assessment task that inspired this paper. The assessment invited students to reflect on their understanding of peace of mind. They were encouraged to explore alternative media or formats in addition to, or instead of the written ‘essay’ format where a formal reference list or bibliography was not required.

However, they were required to indicate the sources of inspiration beyond the traditional scholarly literature. They were encouraged to see, sense and feel its meaning. The invitation to express through different literacies was an experimental epistemology, an exploration of the meaning of peace by thinking through processes and lived experiences in order to experiment with invisible body manifestations. The assessment was not a judgment of the students’ experience, but an exploration of the process. They were welcome to choose photography, scribing, painting, poetry, music, video, text, or whatever way they

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2 Vivianna as co-coordinator was responsible for redesigning and delivering six out of the twelve modules, and one workshop. Vivianna acknowledges the contribution of co-coordinator, Wendy Lambourne who was responsible for teaching and delivering the other modules and the second workshop.
expressed themselves best.³ Fast forward a year later, and inspired by the students’ responses, Penny was invited to collaborate with this paper. Her reflection stood out for her experimental, arts-based approach to embodying the concept of inner peace, and the philosophies and literature that inspired her work, intrinsically related with the redesigned course content.⁴ Those same philosophies were the inspiration for Vivianna’s redesign; to introduce phenomenological theories called abstract methodologies. In Penny’s voice:

I wanted to find a way to give a human shape to the relationship between inner and outer peace, and to test out some of the more abstract concepts in the course. If emotions, thoughts, and sense perceptions were expressed as sounds and images instead of words, and then mapped back onto the body, would this new perspective change how I perceived and embodied these phenomena?

Providing the permission to introspect on internal processes and encouraging a different language of expression, enabled students to access and embody deep knowledge that cannot be expressed in words.

**An Ontological Invitation to the Reader**

The inspiration to teach inner knowing came from different disciplines, particularly phenomenology. Phenomenology in this sense is not a mental or physical view, but a unity between body and mind (Varela et al., 1993, p. 29). Indigenous knowledge also provided inspiration, “it must be close to impossible for indigenous cultures to convey their knowledge to us literates because we ask for it in the way we would write it down, in neat linear sequences. That is not how they know their stories.” (Kelly, 2016, location No. 847). How do we know and relate to our own story? Decolonizing academic experiential methodology required a possibility to open new ways to conveying self-knowledge.

Inspired by these unconventional approaches, this paper embraces non-linear processes, whilst acknowledging resistance to non-linear expression in academia. The aim is to reproduce the unconventional course style in the paper

³ Although the results were remarkable, the coordinators noticed the risk taken by students to express creativity within the academic setting. This prompted us to question the limitations of educators to co-evolve for creativity in higher education when the possibility to create and innovate was not essential on the students’ educational journey within a structural hierarchical institutional context (from high school to undergraduates).

⁴ Since this was not a research study with ethical approval to extract data from students’ work and results, we cannot provide here an analysis of the range of works that emerged from the assessment. Instead, we tailored a narrative between teacher and student from their experience and relationship with content and assessment.
presentation. For example, the reader will notice that Penny’s reflection uses the first-person voice. Also, the results of her experimental assessment draw from a combination of literacies, namely sound and visual. The presentation of this paper and its methods may trigger linear methodologists. We invite the reader to pause and witness the potential of non-linear forms of expression in the educational environment, as well as the paper’s unconventional “structure”.

Why? Because we want to take a step forward from “knowledge’ in an analytical way” (Aikenhead & Mitchell, 2011, p. 69; Goodchild, 2021, p. 79) towards a “sense of collective historical subjectivity and agency and our ‘embodied’ accounts of the truth” (Haraway, 1988, p. 579) through different literacies.

Fragmentation of the Self

Using psychosocial, psychological, and philosophical approaches, the course presented the concept of self-fragmentation in lived experience. A key part of the course syllabus was learning how to deal with collectives that had conflicted past experiences, in other words, trauma. As trauma fragments, “incoherence” emerges and fractures the relations to the self (Hübli, 2020, p. 32). For Gabor Mate, it is the “unprocessed experience” where the self is disconnected from the self (2021). A traumatic event overloads the organic way of being, and consequently the expression of ‘what happened’ is not coherent in writing or speaking. Herman’s unspeakable truth continues in this vein, stating that “the ordinary response to atrocities is to banish them from consciousness. Certain violations of the social compact are too terrible to utter aloud: this is the meaning of the word unspeakable” (Herman, 1997, p. 1). But what is consciousness, and why is consciousness studies literature not found in interdisciplinary courses that prepare peacebuilders and changemakers, who in many cases will decide for those who have experienced the unspeakable? Consciousness arises from living the phenomenon, not analyzing meaning. It is a process of restoring the presence “of myself to myself” (Merleau-Ponty, 2014, p. 16).

Presencing enhances sensing, just as sensing enhances seeing. Sensing extends seeing by moving our locus of attention “inside” a phenomenon. Presencing enlarges the activity of sensing by using our Self as a vehicle for deepening our sensing. The root of the word presencing is *es, which means “to be.” (Scharmer, 2016, p. 164)

It is possible to say then that experiencing trauma fragments the self and the self and feeling presence restores the self and the self, as Figure 1 explains:
Drawing inspiration from Krishnamurti’s (1969) view of fragmentation as the origin of conflict, or consciousness divided, one of the course modules focused on fragmentation. At the same time, awareness became a tool to notice emotions that emerge when experiencing fragmentation. Trauma means fragmentation (Hübl, 2020). To understand the concept of fragmented experience, we need to know how peace of mind can be compromised. The central concept is that trauma is a broken experience (Van der Kolk, 2014; Mate, 2021; Herman, 1997), a disconnected expression of the self from the self.

The process of teaching and assessing was aligned to the session’s topic and the way of teaching. Through an experiential learning activity, students were invited to sense the meaning of fragmented memory. A post-it note exercise was used to reflect on the meaning of fragmentation. This activity adapted from Rebecca Campbell’s “Memories as Post-It Notes” (2014) analogy explains, when victims experience a traumatic event, it is like having the story written into separate post-it notes rather than one whole piece of paper. Each student narrated a random, short but real story in class, with each sentence split into several post-it notes, one after another. Then they spread out the post-it notes. Once the post-it notes are isolated, Campbell’s analogy is amplified by challenging the audience to put together the post-it notes—now in several places—and at the same time imagine an environment of pressure, hierarchy and evaluation to reflect what is felt right after a traumatic experience. By breaking a coherent story into isolated words or phrases, students represent the fragmentation of the experience. Isolated words or sentences do not make sense. Through the experiential learning exercise, students were able to perceive how victim-survivors’ peace of mind can get compromised through sensing

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5 The story they were invited to write was not related to a trauma. It was suggested to write something they did the day before, but something that happened.
fragmentation, and at the same time, reflect on why victim-survivors are called to narrate their traumatic stories after decades of silence as a coherent expression. The self divides as the emotions emerging from the event are rejected. In exchange, Van der Kolk says that in a safe environment “normal memory integrates the elements of each experience into the continuous flow of self-experience by a complex process of association” (2014, p. 180).

A core reading on Fragmentation was Kristeva’s “Approaching Abjection”. The abject blurs the boundaries between the self with the self. It is the inner turmoil where meaning collapses, and the super ego emerges. Where the “repugnance” of the self-separates and forms the abject through objectivization of the Other. It is the denial of the self, the notion of repression, and the split between the “I” and the “Other” (Kristeva, 1982, pp. 2–3). It is also the emotional response to the rejection of the self, a breakdown in the distinction between what is self and what is Other. The reading caused discomfort among the students.

At the beginning of the semester when I was introduced to this theory, I rejected it. Kristeva paints an unnerving vision that is difficult to contemplate, let alone integrate. Despite my initial aversion, I was repeatedly drawn back to the abject. Fear soon gave way to curiosity for the unspeakable.6

David Bohm explored the fragmentation phenomenon through the lens of theoretical physics and concluded that separation was at the root of the current crises faced by humanity. This psychological division into Self and Other has been called “a wrong turn” in human evolution (Krishnamurti, 1980). Believing that they were different and separate, humans sought to control and exploit Nature. Perhaps more dangerously, the accepted human against nature7 narrative created a blind spot that made it difficult to recognize the role humans play in the destruction of the planet. In search for inspiration on cultures where humans and Nature are one, one of the modules was dedicated to Indigenous knowledges.

Indigenous Knowledge

University courses in Social Sciences have normalized literacy as the preferred mode of academic expression; “literate” has become synonymous with being “educated”. Astonishingly, memory systems and encoded ways of communication in Indigenous languages were “allowed to fade from western education” (Kelly,
Yunkaporta argues that “a focus on linear, abstract, declarative knowledge alone not only fails to create complex connectivity but damages the mind” (2019, p. 112). In Peru, according to The Guardian, Quispe Collantes made history by being the first doctoral student to defend a thesis in Indigenous oral language, Quechua (Collyns, 2019). However, it was also presented in writing irrespective of the fact that in oral languages some words are difficult to capture the meaning of, as they include several movements and embodiments in context. For Yunkaporta (2019), the difference between oral and ‘print-based’ cultures is the context. While orality links patterns and symbols, and depends on the field space, ‘print-based’ is defined through designing and itemizing in isolation. The cognitive analysis is in conceptualizing an idea into a word as a way of representing meaning. Kelly’s research also shows that landscapes were crucial in forming memory and creating knowledge across Indigenous cultures worldwide (2016). Capabilities on sensing the world and expressing its understanding in other ways that are as equally legible, valuable and recognized as ‘print-based’ hasn’t advanced simultaneously in higher education.

Colonialism alienated oral cultures and bestowed a sense of superiority to those able to read and write words, whilst denouncing other ways of being and other forms of symbolizing language as inferior ways to sense and to communicate. Indigenous cultures across the world were repressed in their ways of expression. This resulted in oral languages for centuries choosing sketches, drawing in codes, and relying on mnemonic technologies of memory such as textiles, out of the possibility to be equally valued to evolve for educational learning. The standardization in conceptualizing through writing as a linear method for teaching, learning and assessing has resulted in a hierarchy of human expression, and with that power. In education, writing rules was prioritized over phonetics. Yet, as Kelly points out, for most of human history, there was no writing (2016, Location No. 606), and whenever Indigenous knowledge was usurped and replicated in literature, many qualities of knowledge were lost (Kelly, 2016; Yunkaporta, 2019). Weave is an action of creation in several languages, like in Latin text means texere which is to “weave” (Chacon, 2020, p. 49), therefore for many early cultures an act of weaving was an act of conceiving knowledge. In this way, as Chacon states, “the words transform into designs” (2020, p. 59). In Australian songlines, Elders “sing their list of locations, visualizing them in memory and recalling the information associated with each place” (Kelly, 2016, Location No. 604).

A person of ‘high degree’ in traditional knowledge may find a song in a dream if they are profoundly connected to land, lore, spirit and community. But that song must then be taken up by the people and modified gradually through many iterations before it becomes part of the culture. Besides, that song can only be found through a ritual process developed over millennia by that community. The song itself is not as important as the communal knowledge process that produces it (Yunkaporta, 2019, p. 71).
Yunkaporta’s quote inspires us to focus on process and show us how culture forms and transforms through iterations. When people collectively do the same thing over an extended period of time, it becomes embodied, it creates a sense of belonging, it creates Culture (Menakem, 2017, p. 251). Culture is not static. Influenced and constructed socially and politically, it is evolutive, and for this reason it can also be innovative. For Tyson, cultural innovation needs a profound connection with the land and the people for the patterns of creations being visualized (Yunkaporta, 2019, p. 71). For Indigenous people, the interdependence of human and Nature has never been in doubt. This is because “Indigenous means from place” (Perez-Barron, 2021). “I can read the bush”, said Australian Aboriginal Elder Miriam Rose Ungunmerr (2017b) from the Daly River. The land is what they are, an extension of their body (Atkinson, 2002, p. 34). When Indigenous voices are heard at the United Nations and global environment forums, they are speaking on behalf of Nature. This alien worldview seeks to remind us that interconnectivity is the natural state of all human beings, not just an abstract concept.

Listening to Pause

How do we construct an innovative response to the continued violence perpetrated across all levels in a complex system interacting with multiple stakeholders (Lederach, 2005)? By listening to Pause.10

In pausing, we invite the reader to be a participant on the experiential component embedded in the three key elements used in Theory U to open the mind, open the heart and open the will (Scharmer, 2018, p. 25)—to risk. One of the first experiential activities that pre-established the way groups interact was the four listening levels of Theory U. Scharmer considers listening to be our most underrated skill. Students watched the video of 4 levels of listening: “downloading” (reconfirming what we know), “factual” (what is different than what we know), “empathic” (allows us to connect with the experience of the other), and “generative” (connects us with who we are and whom we want to be) (Scharmer, 2015; Scharmer, 2018, pp. 93–94). Then, students did a group exercise to notice in which moment what level they were listening from—downloading, factual, empathic, or generative. The dynamic was to discuss one of

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8 Gina Perez-Barron in conversation with Gabor Mate at the online The Wisdom of Trauma - Expert Speaker Series. June 8-14, 2021.
9 Miriam Ungunm said this during The Art of Meditation and Dadirri talk in Sydney, 2017.
10 While not each module represents each of the subtitles in this paper. The modules focused on the topics explained in this paper. As well, different awareness-based practices, including listening, were embedded across Vivianna’s modules.
the questions they usually prepare for the class.\textsuperscript{11} The main idea was that when one group member spoke, the others were listening and trying to see from which listening level they were operating. For example, in groups of three people, each student listened for three minutes, followed by one minute of silence, then the next person spoke for three minutes, and so on. The key was to \textit{pause}. In that minute before it was the next person’s turn to talk is when the magic happened. While anecdotal, some of the feedback was that they felt uncomfortable at first, particularly during the minute of silence. During the minute, they also realized that prior to the exercise, they tended to jump into response mode, without paying attention to what the other person had said. The minute allowed them to pause and to notice from which level of listening they were operating from and to be in presence. After that, it was easier to remind students to apply listening skills when doing group work without further specific guidance or the need to do a minute of silence.

Another way of pausing is exercising mindfulness. During the course, we drew from different sources to contemplate and understand awareness. \textit{Dadirri}, is to listen deeply and connect, said Aboriginal Elder Miriam Rose Ungunmerr (2017a). It means contemplation and it is a way of life. It is about living versus conceptualizing what it means cognitively. Those descriptions, however, do not translate the lived experience of imagination. Judy Atkinson put into words that \textit{Dadirri} gathers information in quiet observation and deep listening, building knowledge through awareness and contemplation or reflection, which informs action (2002, p. 18). In \textit{Dadirri}, learning is an embodied experience, Ungunmerr (1988, p. 2) reminds us that listening and waiting are key, but also enable us to act.

It was challenging to redesign the course with new resources from literature that are often perceived as meta-philosophy or mystical, and to include additional resources that were not literate. For this, the assessment also needed to open the space for other ways of communication and other ways of knowing—as a basis for the expression to be accepted. Social Science in Universities have predominantly praised the essay. Yet, to answer the assessment on their personal perspective on the meaning of ‘peace of mind’ requires, as Mueller put it, “being human” (2017, p. 25); being in presence (Scharmer, 2018); and in space-time relation (Hübl, 2020). Trying out a non-linear assessment method added an experiential experiment: to trust the students. It was an opportunity to experiment with an authentic way of being, doing and sensing. In her reflection video, Penny explores how some of the more abstract concepts in the course can be experienced and embodied.

\textsuperscript{11} The question itself is not relevant to understanding the exercise. The listening exercise was meant to work for a group discussion.
Penny’s Reflection: Visualizing Peace of Mind

In an effort to notice new things about the nature of my mind, I designed a video experiment to answer two questions: how do emotions affect peace of mind, and can data visualization and sonification be used as a creative diagnostic tool for self-awareness?

Scribing with my camera, an old piano, and editing software, I set out to conceptualize the relationship between body and mind by mapping the ebb and flow of my emotions back onto the body. If I observe emotions as they arise—rather than suppress or seek alternative feelings—will this observation influence peace of mind and bring about awareness of the totality of experience, and is it valuable to create and view a new perspective of ourselves?

First, I needed data. I set a bell to ring on the hour every hour between 7 am and 10 pm, and for seven days I recorded the character of my experience by charting my personal activities, the events around me, my emotions and their location in the body, the feelings experienced in these emotional states, my peace of mind, and any images that appeared as thoughts in the moment. I then translated this data into an abstract visual and musical language. My peace of mind (P.O.M) was recorded as a number on a scale of one to ten, where one describes less intensity and ten describes more (figure 3). Each emotion was expressed by a different color. For example, happiness—yellow, sadness—blue, fear—grey (figure 2).

I was inspired by Nummenmaa’s emBODY tool—an experiment where participants colored in blank body regions to describe the location and movement of emotions in and on the body, forming a map that linked bodily sensation to emotional processing (Nummenmaa, L. et al., 2014). However, in my experiment the human form is realistic, not an outline, and emotionally triggered body sensations appeared as shapeshifting color clouds and graphic images in the region where emotions were felt (figure 4).

To create the soundscape, each number on the peace of mind scale was represented by a different musical chord (figure 3). Emotions that I initially perceived as negative were described as minor chords, and emotions that were perceived as positive became major chords. For example, happiness (+VE) was visualized as a yellow cloud and could be accompanied by a major musical chord like C# major which is high (8) on the P.O.M scale. Whereas fear (-VE) was represented by a purple cloud and might be sonically expressed as a minor chord such as D minor, which is low (2) on the P.O.M scale (figure 2). The melody and rhythm were dictated by the feelings I experienced. The end result was a polyphonic representation of my emotional landscape.
The novelty of data gathering soon gave way to growing dissatisfaction. I rejected feeling depressed and anxious because I believed my efforts would guarantee peace of mind. Instead, I was literally feeling 'out' of my mind—outside of the mind. This was a turning point. I expected my experiment to lead to greater peace of mind, but as it plummeted on the scale, hour after hour, I was forced to accept the data, and simply observe without judgment. If my inner state was expressed in a different language (musical and/or visual), would this change how I perceived it?

I made a total of three videos from data collected over seven days in April, 2020. Each video was roughly 40 seconds long. Four seconds of data from Sunday the 5th of April between 1 and 2 pm (00:14 in the video) can be described as follows:

At 1pm, I felt neutral, which was expressed as a green color cloud radiating all over my body, merged with the image of a summery sky. My peace of mind was high, number 9, which was expressed as strong, ascending D major chords on the piano to represent my positive feelings (relaxed, peaceful, satisfied). When my emotion shifted to anxiety, the color cloud changed to bronze fireworks and contracted to cover just my head and torso. My peace of mind had fallen to 6, represented by a minor chord on the piano, A minor. My feelings, (now stirred up and agitated), were expressed in a heavy chord on the piano, waiting to be answered. Next, I felt love. The color cloud changed to pink, expanding to cover my head, torso and arms. My peace of mind lifted to number 8 on the scale, and a corresponding C# major chord was played, but this time it was
sustained (held down on the piano) to express my feelings of compassion and self-forgiveness.

From this new perspective, it was possible to notice that when I’m not mindful, my experience of life is fragmented, and I imagine a gap between body and mind and a similar gap between self and other. This persistent illusion of separation causes psychological discord, perhaps because we experience emotions directly in the body. We think there is separation, yet we feel differently. Language reinforces the sense of I, the sense of a separate self. Visually mapping emotions back onto my body reinforced that I embody emotions. I enjoyed listening to the soundtrack of my feelings and watching the colored energy fields and images flash across my body. When I viewed the data, I felt embarrassed and flawed, but when the data was translated into music and video (figure 4) I embraced the experience. We are conditioned to prefer positive emotions over negative ones, which in turn creates conflict. But if equal attention was given to negative emotions perhaps, they would be less destructive.

In the end, feeling peace of mind did not imply that I would only experience peaceful and positive feelings. It more accurately described my equanimity when it came to receiving and observing the relentless, psycchedelic stream of emotions in my life. It was possible to see thoughts, memories, sense perceptions, and emotions as mental activities. For example, “I am happy” became “there is happiness”. I could see how the words “I” and “mine”, although useful in conventional language, can reinforce the sense of an individualized self that is having an experience. But as I watched the video—without the limitations of words to influence my perception—it was harder to mistake these phenomena for what I am; that process was interrupted. From this new perspective of my inner state, the movement of phenomena (and the patterns they made) was suddenly impersonal. These aspects of the self were revealed as a pattern, rapidly shifting, never fixed, impossible to hold onto. In the color clouds of my video, I was able to see the movement of emotions, and in the piano notes I could hear the unique tones of thoughts, but the self I had initially felt that all of this was happening to was absent. Instead, this self was reidentified as an appearance arising from the movement of these many phenomena in the moment they are experienced.

At this point, I want to acknowledge the incongruity of reflecting from the “I” whilst declaring the lack of a separate, personalized self. To communicate my experience, I have deferred to the rules of conventional language and the normative use of “I”. Throughout this reflection, “I” refers to my subjective first-person experience.

The abstract arts can help bring forth that which is unrecognized or unspeakable by scrutinizing the sense of a separate, personalized self. Without words to label an experience we are simply left to identify with the experience itself. My experiment was a creative way to test the borders of this illusion in my lived experience. Recognition of the inner process of peace provides a deeper understanding of its link with outer peace. The world inside is the world outside.
In pointing out the repression of the self, urged to seek its opposite, there is release: Human expression. How do we originate integration as a sensory experience from the division of the self and discover wholeness? Human expression enables us to experiment.

Throughout the centuries we have had an unconscious hierarchy of both what and how we sense and express sensations. “The senses communicate... without compromising their unity” (Merleau-Ponty, 2014, p. 234), and they express in different ways showing qualities that make each human authentic. Breathing is a way to communicate that we are in existence, and the meaning of
our sensations emerge through the body. Bateson describes aesthetics as the response to patterns that connect (Bateson, 1979). Then, experimenting with experiential learning and motions through the different manifestations of aesthetics, parts of the brain are activated. Abstract approaches can enable us to see the manifestation of those connections. The problem then is that mainstream education has prioritized reading and writing, and literate cultures did not develop to integrate human artistic expressions with enough sensitivity to read a painting. The human mind could be expressed to a higher potential, where perhaps “the power of reason could transcend the body” (Mueller, 2017, p. 15) —leaving behind Descartes legacy to separate the human mind from the world of senses (Mueller, 2017, p. 20). Descartes’ worldview dismissed teaching and learning through lived experience and the senses. “You should not trust your senses” he said to his students, adding that they should ignore the feelings of living creatures, including animals. Known as the Cartesian split of the mind, a resignation to all body sensations implied that certainty was superior (Mueller, 2017, p. 13). Reasoning and the concrete were attributed a higher value in the construction of knowledge. At the same time, nurturing, emotional, and abstract responses were hierarchically conceptualized and embodied as weak.

In his 1844 treatise for artists, Charles Bell recognized the anatomical expression of emotions, “emotion is nothing but the feeling of the reflex bodily effects” (James, 1884, p.194). Art is the expression embodied by the felt sensations; the word art in Latin means Artem, by ability to craft qualities. Andreas Weber said:

> The medium for feeling must be emotionally shaped matter. Feeling needs matter like fish need water. Without matter the language feeling could not appear—because feeling would not be there... A work of art is at once matter and meaning. It is the material arrangement of an emotional content by means of the senses (Weber, 2016, p. 124).

As such, we focused on the sensory experience of the encounter. Stephan Harding discovers that there is more to science than analysis, reason and quantities. A moment of encounter is to contemplate qualities (Harding in Angel et al. 2011) that go beyond the intellectual capabilities (Harding, 2017). This process acknowledges the sensory phenomenon and gives permission to the body to become granular and materialize the emotions. Weber refers to Jaak Pansepp on how “our interior being is expressed in one universal language, the lingua franca of the body” (Weber, 2016 p.124). Embodiment is going through a reflective experience to unify the body and the mind (Varela et al., 1993, p. 27). The unconventional assignment was the medium to the students’ reflection.

Safety spaces to witness knowledge emerging from the inner senses are necessary. Porges argues that “only when we are in a calm physiological state can we convey cues of safety to another” (2017, p. 50). It will be challenging then to distinguish between “safety” and “danger” when someone lacks a real sense of inner security (Van der Kolk, 2014, p. 119). In programs designed for
peacebuilders and changemakers, using disembodied methods to engage with the unseen and human vulnerability is contradictory. Maturana and Varela (1987) said that we are humans because of language, through behavior we generate mechanisms to communicate. “The universal language is an existential meaning conveyed through expressive form. And the form leading to that meaning can be expressed by any number of expressive means” (Weber, 2016, p.125). Humans express! The “bodily process” reveals “many visible, tactile, audible, olfactory and other perceptual dimensions” (Weber, 2016, p. 89). Scharmer, inspired by Rudolf Steiner, states: “Trust your senses, trust your observations, trust your own perception as the fundamental starting point of any investigation” (2016, 31).

Teaching and assessing with different resources such as paintings, scribing, or weaving can be challenging for mainstream higher education. It is a learning curve process in which catching up to access these other intelligences in academia will take time. Yet, in continuing the inspiration with indigeneity culture, the craft (process) is as essential as the art (final piece) produced. Chacon explains that imprints embody the authorship when weavers give body to their creation (2020, p. 64). This paper recognized print-based literacy limitations on embodying the authorship and argues that focusing on crafting expression with complexity beyond authorship is necessary to foster conscious agency.

**Conclusion**

What if a demonstrated and deep understanding gained from the learning process was assigned an academic value? Wisdom as the meaning of deep understanding is something attained, it is a quality of knowledge that evolves in depth, it is abstract and non-hierarchical. Non-writing modes of expression deserve equal value in academia precisely because they challenge hierarchical thinking. How will peacebuilders and changemakers benefit the vulnerable if their own vulnerability, and their sense of separateness from the world, remains intact and unrecognized?

Breaking the illusion of separation could be the key to ending and restoring the split between mind and body, self and other, human and nature. To know this cognitively is not enough, we must experience and feel it to shift the current paradigm of Western thinking. Failing to recognize the illusion creates conflict and disturbs inner peace. Albert Einstein recognized humans are part of the whole:

> A human being is part of the whole, called by us ‘Universe,’ a part limited in time and space. He experiences himself, his thoughts and feelings as something separate from the rest—a kind of optical delusion of his consciousness. The striving to free oneself from this delusion is the one issue of true religion. Not to nourish it but to try to overcome it is the to reach the attainable measure of peace of mind (Einstein, 1950).
We have to overcome the sense of separation by integrating the abject. Abject can be cathartic (Kristeva, 1982). For this reason, confrontations with the abject, when framed creatively, can serve as potential sites for transformation. The key to enabling embracing processes and attentiveness to the interior condition in relatedness to processes is authenticity. With trust, students like Penny were willing to break the hierarchy in ways of expression, experimenting with how they could work intuitively to best address their understanding of the subject—in this case—their inner peace in relation to outer peace. In understanding the split of body and mind, we perceive the hierarchically superior value given to the concrete, the seen, the visible force, and what we believe has certainty. In the symbolic space, there is potential for reflection and transformation. The movement between the real and the symbolic can help break down the boundaries of separation.

This paper argued that being a changemaker for a more peaceful and secure world requires us to encounter non-cognitive centric ways of learning in order to be vulnerable. Taking an epistemological approach to peace and security is not enough to break the cycles of violence. Lederach proposes to create spaces for inner dialogue and “to-talk-to-ourselves”. A creative and imaginative approach where judgement is suspended, and inquiry emerges. In order to build peace, he suggests that we need “the imagination of risk” because violence is known, and peace is unknown (Lederach, 2005, p. 39). We must learn to embrace the unknown to see ourselves in the terrifying Other—the abject. Otherness emerges from embodied information, a process Ihde’s refers to as “embodiment relation” (Ihde, 1979, p. 9). The abject denies the ability of the I to be in presence. Reducing the abject to only the visual frame creates a safe distance to examine the relationship without fear of the abject “invading our boundaries” (Seegert, 2014, p.11). Penny explored her relationship to the abject in the video experiment:

I was faced with a destabilizing paradox. I created the video as a medium to explore the wholeness of human experience, yet found myself rejecting parts of the process that were too uncomfortable to integrate into the experience, thus reinforcing the split I was attempting to prove was an illusion. But this is precisely how the abject functions, it can be used as a psychic strategy to highlight flawed subjectivity and identity. Untangling and deciphering paradoxes is the domain of the abject. What is designated as abject decenters the beholder, but fear and retreat are optional. The groundlessness of primal horror can be a signal; a roaring reminder that separation is a collective delusion, the enemy of peace, a limiter in the wholeness of life.

Incorporating experiential teaching and assessment through embodying knowledge, shifted student perception in relation to inner and outer peace. Can a shift in perception mean that someone has transformed? This paper does not sustain that students were transformed or changed from point a to point b.
Transforming students was not part of the purpose. Instead, the aim of redesigning the course was to enable different ways of expression to account for new realities. If students shifted perception or were “transformed,” it is the result of exposure to other methods in teaching, learning and assessing. The assessment demonstrated that experimenting with inner peace is an ongoing process that only exists when expressing (doing) and subject in movement (being) are in relationship to something and not isolated actions. It is an evolving phenomenon and not always perceptible to human eyes. For most students, concluding how inner peace is intrinsically linked to outer peace was genuinely new.

We conclude that higher education needs to value nurturing and emotional responses to enable other expressions to emerge. We argued that painting and weaving in Indigenous cultures contained a vast amount of knowledge, and intuition and embodiment were needed to interpret the information. These invisible intelligences were not developed at the same pace as print-based literacy; therefore, students—unless they are art students—lack the sensibility to consciously embody a painting, a textile, a mapping of emotions, or nature. The arts, of course, includes writing as a form of expression, and mixed creative genres such as poetry and music. The argument is not vilifying reading and writing. The point is, education hierarchically defines being literate as having an education, and this is typically embedded within culture, activating othering. To what degree is culture subconsciously embodied? Western acculturation established print-based literacy and linear knowledge as ‘certain’ and ‘higher’ human expressions to the other values. As a result, for example, Indigenous oral languages are seen as inferior in the dominant model of Western Education, giving space to reductive labelling, or othering as non-literate, non-educated. The result is that in mainstream higher education there is not enough sensibility and situatedness to apprehend Indigenous cosmovision. Yet, if we consider the classroom as a space for experimenting with our own transformation, then we are open to exploring complex inner dynamics such as integrating the split (the separation of the self). Consciously embodied sensibility is to be one with the self, the other, and the Earth again.

References


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