Working in a ‘community-engaged’ university during an era of reconciliation

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Abstract
This duoethnography, informed by the new materialist turn, explores how educational work is materially reconfigured within university–community collaborations. Through our co-facilitation of two community-based Master of Education programs we, as White settlers, endeavoured to journey with Indigenous colleagues, community members, and students to respond to calls for transformative reconciliation. It is within these complex relational fields that we explore the shifting nature of our work as educators within a Canadian university. When educational work resides within community, it becomes a living relationship among people and place, requiring a new type of faculty expertise that disrupts the usual boundaries between disciplinary knowledge and the academic triad, and exceeds professional responsibilities. Through our MEd programs, we are coming to understand our work as educators as always a collaborative act in the making, and as a form of scholarly activism.

Keywords Educational work · Community engagement · New materialism · Co-construction of programs · Boundary disruption · Agential cuts · Transformative reconciliation

For the past three decades, there have been increasing calls for universities to better serve the common good by engaging in partnerships with communities and re-directing resources and capacities to address local social issues (Moore, 2014; Weerts & Sandmann, 2008). While community engagement is understood in diverse...
ways, the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching provides a commonly cited vision, drawing heavily on reciprocal partnerships and co-creation.

Community engagement describes the collaboration between institutions of higher education and their larger communities for the mutually beneficial exchange of knowledge and resources in a context of partnership and reciprocity. The purpose of community engagement is the partnership of college and university knowledge and resources with those of the public and private sectors to enrich scholarship, research and creative activity; enhance curriculum, teaching and learning; prepare educated, engaged citizens; strengthen democratic values and civic responsibility; address critical societal issues; and contribute to the public good. (Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching, 2020, p. 1)

As more and more universities commit to the Carnegie Foundation’s elective process of accreditation for community engagement, the work of university educators will undoubtedly change, particularly within research intensive institutions (Moore, 2014). This centering of community connections and reciprocal relationships within the usual faculty responsibilities disrupts images of faculty members being confined to the ‘ivory tower’ and serves to challenge what is traditionally understood as the work of university educators. While the boundaries of educational work are fluid and contested (Newman et al., 2014), faculty responsibilities are often narrowly defined, for example within performance reviews, that are not always aligned with the duties of educators within community settings (McGregor et al., 2016; Rossing & Lavitt, 2016). Although diverse and inconsistent conceptualisations of educational work can be destabilising for faculty, the ambiguous spaces in-between hold great potential for new possibilities (Fitzgerald et al., 2020; Hill et al., 2019; Newman et al., 2014). We believe that these liminal spaces in which programs are situated within communities but still governed by the university, are an important site for re-imagining traditional conceptions of faculty work, as well as teaching and learning.

The enactment of community engagement differs based on institutional and disciplinarily contexts (O’Meara et al., 2011), as well as philosophical goals and commitments (Jackson, 2014), and can involve a range of purposes, processes, and products (Stanton, 2008), having different implications for the work of university educators. Besides being shaped by university values and commitments, community-engaged work is also influenced by place, as it unfolds within particular socio-cultural contexts. As Moore (2014) contends, “history, culture, and socioeconomics of a physical location, as well as the interactions of people in that place, should be noted as very important details when examining interactions between university actors and the communities they serve” (p. 12).

Indeed, our work as faculty members within an institution, that identifies as both a research intensive and an “engaged” university, and is built on stolen Indigenous

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1 The Carnegie Foundation’s accreditation for community engagement is common across US universities and is currently being implemented internationally with pilot projects underway at universities in Canada, Australia and Malaysia, including at our institution.
land, has changed significantly during this era of reconciliation. As educators, scholars, and as citizens we are responsible for responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada’s Calls to Action (2015), including the mandatory teaching of Indigenous-Settler history (residential schools and treaties), and Indigenous knowledges, pedagogies, and current contributions in schools. Our Faculty commitment to Indigenisation and Equity affirms our collective responsibility to decolonne our practice as academics and work towards transformative reconciliation. As teacher educators, this responsibility is heightened by our provincial government’s expectation that Kindergarten to Grade 12 (K-12) teachers will Indigenise curriculum and pedagogy (British Columbia Ministry of Education, n.d.). This mandate is central to the curricular goals within our pre-service and in-service teacher education programs, and requires learning from, for and with our students, and Indigenous scholars and community members, as we try and understand what this means and how it can be enacted.

Through our co-facilitation of two community-based Master of Education programs, one responding to a request from the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (anglicised as “Squamish”) First Nation to support members of their community in developing leadership capacities (Margaret), and one in collaboration with members of the q̓ic̓əy̓ (Katzie) and q̓ʷa:n̓ƛ̓ən̓ (Kwantlen) Nations to support practising teachers in developing place-conscious pedagogical practices (Cher), we endeavour to journey with Indigenous community members to co-construct programs. In doing so, we strive towards making right relations, recognising Indigenous laws, protocols, practices, and land rights, as well as the ongoing impact of settler-colonialism (Asch et al., 2018; Ross, 2006). It is within these complex relational fields that we explore the shifting nature of our work as university educators.

As much of the research of on community-engaged faculty work is based on survey or interview data, this inquiry responds to the call for more auto/ethnographic forms of research that can illuminate the complexity of community-engaged work as it unfolds “within the field” (O’Meara et al., 2011). Informed by the new materialist turn (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2013), this duoethnography is guided by the following questions: How does our educational work unfold within place-based programs developed in collaboration with Indigenous Nations? How are faculty responsibilities reconfigured in these spaces? How is educational work materiality constituted within these collaborative and community-engaged contexts?

**Theoretical framing**

As the engaged work of university educators within community spaces involves the disruption of many common boundaries, such as university/community, service/teaching/research, self/other, and personal/professional, we situated this research within a new materialist framework (Barad, 2007; Braidotti, 2011). New materiality is a non-dualist approach that troubles the division of our worlds into categories, forefronts somatic realities, illuminates productions of difference, and encourages boundary crossing. Based on a relational ontology, subjects and knowledges are not understood as pre-existing, rather they come into being
during the moment of contact (Barad, 2007, 2014). In this regard our identities and subjectivities as an educator shifts, sometimes in contradictory ways, within different socio-material contexts. For example, when Cher’s MEd class was learning experientially with and through the forest, her insistence that students also read a fair amount of related academic texts was sometimes met with the concern that she was perpetuating a colonial form of learning, constituting her as overly “rigorous.” Yet when back at the university, within the context of largely standardised pedagogical practices, the profound place-conscious learning that she was supporting was at times misunderstood as little more than “camping.” Within this context, she was not rigorous enough. Barad refers to these co-constitutive exchanges where reality is continually defined through a shifting web of connections as “intra-action” (Barad, 2007, 2014). As she explains,

The usual notion of interaction assumes that there are individual independently existing entities or agents that preexist their acting upon one another. By contrast, the notion of “intra-action” queers the familiar sense of causality (where one or more causal agents precede and produce an effect), and more generally unsettles the metaphysics of individualism (the belief that there are individually constituted agents or entities, as well as times and places). …“individuals” do not preexist as such but rather materialize in intra-action. (Kleinman, 2012, p. 77)

Barad’s conception of agential cuts further informs this research. Agential cuts refers to socio-material practices that create ontological and epistemological distinctions, producing differences that are often hierarchically ordered. For example, enacting community engagement as “service learning” is an agential cut that can serve to produce individuals who require help (the community) and individuals who are positioned to provide knowledge and assistance (the university), whereas enacting community engagement as “neighbourhood learning” can serve to disrupt binaries and hierarchies between “university” and “community,” creating more reciprocal practices (see Moore, 2014).

As responsible scholars it is important for us to acknowledge that many common aspects of new materialist perspectives, such as the de-centring of the human, relational ontologies, and the recognition of the material force of the inanimate, overlap with many Indigenous ontologies, calling into question how “new” this body of scholarship really is (Cariou, 2018; Todd, 2016). Further, in this work, our move away from humanism feels naive and entitled and at times at odds with our decolonial agenda (Zembylas, 2018). As White settler scholars we are mindful of the ways that Indigenous populations have been, and continue to be, constituted as less than human and subject to disenfranchisement, oppression and acts of genocide. We have asked ourselves: Are we merely continuing a form of annihilation if we adopt a new materialist framing, moving beyond a humanist perspective in our engagement with this work? Rather than accepting a new materiality perspective unquestioningly, therefore, we ask: How can we use new materiality as a methodological lens to help reconfigure agentic cuts (Barad, 2007) to become relational and respectful? In this work it remains important to critically
engage and re-remember the pain that has been inflicted on Indigenous peoples who have in many contexts been positioned as less than human.

With these caveats stated and upheld, we follow the new materialist turn (Barad, 2007), and explore how educational work is materiality constituted within the context of our collaborative, community-engaged MEd programs. As new materialists, we view knowledge, learning, identities and subjectivities as relationally constituted and in continuous motion, rather than stable and pre-existing. We attend to agential cuts (Barad, 2007, 2014) that serve to produce or disrupt boundaries, creating difference, but only temporarily, within worlds continuously in the process of unfolding. In this way, educational work can be understood as a multiplicity—that is, it has the potential to unfold rhizomatically in multiple directions (although some assemblages are more stable than others). When educational programs move off campus, the material conditions change, enabling something new to emerge. This “cutting-together-apart” (Barad, 2014) emphasises the permeability and potentiality of educational work in which interference through material change can shift faculty responsibilities in new directions. Our research intends to make visible the material and relational landscapes of our engaged educational work.

**Context**

**MEd in place-conscious and nature-based practices**

This Master’s of Education program, facilitated by Cher, was offered on the un-surrendered territories\(^2\) of the q̓íc̓əy̓ and q̓ʷa:n̓ƛ̓ən̓ people from 2017 to 2019. The two-year program was held primarily outdoors, respecting nature as teacher (Blenkinsop & Beeman, 2010; Blenkinsop & Piersol, 2013), and with a focus on local knowledge and the colonial histories of place. Prior to the commencement of the program, the Director Graduate Studies and affiliated faculty members met with q̓íc̓əy̓ and q̓ʷa:n̓ƛ̓ən̓ Band council members to seek permission to host this work on their territories. As local Indigenous knowledge and practices were central to the curriculum, learning from Elders and knowledge keepers was a key aspect of the program. All of the learners enrolled in the six semester program were practising educators, and although there were several students who self-identified as Indigenous or held Indigenous ancestry, the vast majority of students and all of the instructional team were White people with settler ancestry.

**MEd Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumíxw**

The curriculum and structure of the Skwxwú7mesh Úxwumíxw program was designed jointly by members of the Faculty of Education and Skwxwú7mesh Nation

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\(^2\) Unlike other Canadian provinces, nearly all of the Land in British Columbia was never sold, traded or relinquished within a treaty process. Consequently, most of what is considered municipal or privately owned Land within the Greater Vancouver area is actually stolen Indigenous territories.
and was delivered in community using a cohort model. In this model, students were provided release time from their work by the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Nation to attend classes. Over the first almost two semesters from September 2019 to March 2020, classes were held on-Reserve every Friday. Later, with COVID-19 restrictions that prevented gathering, classes were held virtually up until August 2020 when permission was obtained to resume the final class and the final presentations face to face. Most of the students were admitted to the program using non-traditional admission requirements, based on several years of exemplary and varied educational and professional experience. Those students admitted into the certificate program could transfer to the MEd if they maintained graduate level performance standards in the first 3 of the 7 courses. In the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw program, all of the students, all instructors (except Margaret) and both Site Assistants are Indigenous and all have taken up the work of decolonising practices and cultural resurgence.

**Personal context**

We, Cher and Margaret, understand our own identities as "lived and embodied" (Battell Lowman & Barker, 2015, p. 14) and constituted within relational fields (Strom & Martin, 2017). In this work we identify as White Settler scholars living as uninvited guests on Turtle Island (Canada) and residing in the un-surrendered Coast Salish territory of the kʷi̓ kʷəƛ̓əm peoples, which translates to Red Fish Up the River (Kwikwetlem First Nation, 2022), reflecting the sockeye salmon that once was abundant in this area prior to colonisation. In kʷi̓ kʷəƛ̓əm and neighbouring territories, White settlers are known as “xʷənitəm̓,” the hungry ones, a reference to the voracity of our colonial appetite for resources and power and by implication, the destruction we have caused.

**Methodology and methods**

Guided by the methodological practices of duoethnography (Breault, 2016; Sawyer & Norris, 2013) informed by the new materialist turn, this research involved a collaborative exploration of our diverse experiences working as White settler educators within community-based master’s programs. Duoethnography commonly involves a critical dialogic process producing a “transformative text” through engaging multiple perspectives and positionalities (Sawyer & Norris, 2013). Within this research tradition, lived experience is understood as a site for research (Breault, 2016). Collaboratively, duoethnographers explore commonalities and discrepancies inherent within their experiences to “excavate the temporal, social, cultural, and geographical cartography of their lives” (Sawyer & Norris, 2013, p. 2). As duoethnography is an inquiry-based methodology often used by educators to investigate their experiences, examine questions related to professional practice, as well as explore issues related to identity (Huang & Karas, 2020; MacDonald & Markides, 2019), it is well suited to the goals of this research.
Although there are paradigmatically differing assumptions underlying new materialism and duoethnography, new materialist scholars encourage researchers to read diverse theoretical frameworks “through one another,” inviting interference across texts and enabling novel ways of thinking, doing and being, as well as the illumination of difference making practices (Barad, 2007). In this study we worked across these epistemological and ontological boundaries, attending to points of resonance, as well as interference (see Hill, 2017). There are multiple synergies across these methodological perspectives, including the entanglement of the researcher within the research, as well as the centrality of texts and artefacts within the knowledge construction process. Where new materiality and duoethnography differ however, is in terms of ontological assumptions about the nature of reality. Within duoethnography, the researchers are viewed as distinct individuals, whose understanding of a particular phenomenon is deepened through interactions in which experiences are shared. New materialists however, understand distinctions between self and other, as well as between self and culture as co-constituted and continuously re-worked within specific contexts. Similar to Denshire and Lee’s (2013) challenge to autoethnographic methods, duoethnography can be understood as an agential cut in which these binaries are reified.

An implication of the unproblematic privileging of the auto in autoethnography is that it can reinforce a binary divide between self and culture, thus risking the elision of more complex socio-material arrangements and circumstances that produce both the self and the practice being represented (Denshire & Lee, 2013, p. 222).

Through a new materialist lens, duoethnography involves an exploration of the entangled unfoldings of everyday events, rather than an analysis of causal relationships and the interactions between structural forces and individual experiences (Fox & Alldred, 2018). In this regard, power and agency are contingent upon the relational capacities within particular assemblages. Enacting duoethnography through a new materialist lens shifts the research beyond interpretative practices to an analysis of how educational work is constituted within specific settings, understanding both people and things as agential with these ongoing occurrences.

Consistent with duoethnography, we embraced our own unique experiences as a site of research within this study (Breault, 2016; Sawyer & Norris, 2013). When embarking on our new community-based teaching assignments, we realised that they were going to be informative and decided to document our experiences. We came together at a qualitative research conference in 2019 and considered ways that we could use duoethnography to learn from our roles in these two assignments. Our sources of data included our journal entries written over the course of our two-year programs, and a series of reflective writing in the form of 12 vignettes and letters that highlighted key events and moments of provocation, as well as tensions regarding our contributions, roles, identities and

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3 Cher’s journal runs from September 2017 to August 2019 and Margaret’s from September 2018 to July 2020.
work. We met once or twice a month on zoom over a period of 10 months to discuss our writing and reflect on our experiences.

Our analysis of the data moved beyond the intersubjective methodology of duoethnography, embracing a new materialist intra-subjective method in which research participants—human and otherwise—were understood as co-constitutive within particular assemblages. We read key passages from our writing through (Jackson & Mazzei, 2012) photos from our reflective walks (described below). We also read these passages through Indigenous scholarship (Jacobs, 2010; Kelly, 2013; Kimmerer, 2013; Tuck & Yang, 2014; Tuhiwai Smith, 2012) and settler scholarship (Battell Lowman & Barker, 2015; Haig-Brown, 2001) that informed and challenged our thinking. Like Sawyer and Norris (2013), we understand existing literature as a participant within the research dynamic. Within this post-qualitative inquiry (St. Pierre, 2017), we were continuously “becoming-with the data” (Lenz Taguchi, 2012, p. 265), as we shared the living stories of our community-engaged educational work with one another and questioned what is becoming within this educative assemblage? How does it work? Under what conditions does something new arise? How is difference produced and what differences come to matter? (Haraway, 1997; Lenz Taguchi, 2012; St. Pierre, 2017).

Thinking with the Land (Blenkinsop & Beeman, 2010; Blenkinsop & Piersol, 2013; Kelly, 2013) was an important aspect of our new materialist informed inquiry process, and our walks through Coast Salish forests were paramount in complexifying our understanding of work as educators within community-university spaces. Initially we envisioned that we would take these walks together but as our analysis occurred within the first year of the COVID pandemic, we participated in these reflective walks independently and consequently our engagement with trees and plants intensified. We were drawn in particular to the imagery of boundary making and boundary disruption during our reflections with the forest. We took photos to share with one another and these photos became part of our subsequent dialogues and research assemblages. This process of toggling back and forth between images and ideas in ways that both disrupt and enhance thinking can produce novel renderings that can complexify understandings (see Springgay et al., 2005). The images that held energy for us and became part of our research assemblages are included within the corresponding sections of this article to create an aesthetic (see Figs. 1, 2 3). As Latham and McCormack (2009) contend,

The force of images is not just representational. Images are also blocks of sensation with an affective intensity: they make sense not just because we take time to figure out what they signify, but also because their pre-signifying affective materiality is felt in bodies. (p. 253)

We invite readers to experience the affective qualities of these visuals in which boundaries are collapsed, established, reified, and crossed. In doing so, we aim to create a space for readers to draw their own logic, rather than providing an explicit explanation in words.
Engaged educational work

What follows are three interrelated accounts of how educational work is materiality constituted within the context of our community-engaged programs, and the ways in which our work as faculty members has shifted when we are in community. In particular, we attend to elements of educational work in which agential cuts have altered boundaries, either producing or limiting possibilities.

Educational work: a living relationship with people and place

Educational work as growing together

Relationships are commonly understood as a foundational aspect of educational work (Noddings, 2012), and relationship building is recognised as an essential aspect of community engagement (Langan & Morton, 2014). Within a university context however, relationships are often seen as a means to an end. For example, educators nurture pedagogical relationships to enable student learning, program coordinators cultivate partnerships to meet enrolment goals, and faculties develop “strategic” relationships to address institutional mandates. While these relationships may be authentic, they are often targeted and/or short term. Within the context of our MEd programs, relationships between the university and Indigenous communities were foundational to the success of the programs, but perhaps more importantly, the programs served as a site for the member of the university and the communities to grow together. Within these contexts, our responsibilities as educators shifted and our work took on an even greater importance. As Margaret explains,

When I think about the inception of the Skwxwú7mesh MEd Program I’m always reminded of the ARC, the Aboriginal Reconciliation Council. ARC was charged with envisioning the ways our university would address the 94 recommendations of Canada’s Truth and Reconciliation Commission. At that time, our Dean Kris Magnusson and faculty member Vicki Kelly worked with Chris Lewis, a Councillor of the Skwxwú7mesh Nation and a member of the SFU Board of Governors, along with Joanne Curry our VP of External Relations. These community connections led to a Memorandum of Understanding signed on November 29, 2017. The foundational intent of the MOU is to strengthen long-standing relationships between the university and the Nation. It represented a commitment to the MEd program and came on the heels of other research and teaching partnerships between SFU and Skwxwú7mesh members. Different than most programs in our faculty, this program grew out of a vision held by leaders to take reconciliatory action and put us all on the path to restore right relations. These hopes and expectations brought feelings of humility—and being humbled is a good thing—I’m reminded that this program is my learning too. (Margaret, Journal Entry, September 2019)
Within the Skwxwú7mesh MEd Program, a shared vision of the ongoing commitment of the university and the community to work together to transform relations, was foundational to the educational work, and how it was enacted.

Unlike Margaret, Cher initially approached the task of involving members of local Indigenous communities in her program with a more instrumental approach, focussing on building relationships to meet the goals of the program, but quickly came to see that the primarily focus of the work all along was not just to build a relationship but to be in relation.

Initially I assumed that it would be very straightforward to support our students in learning about local Indigenous knowledges, histories and practices by hiring knowledge keepers and Elders as guest speakers. This, however, proved to be challenging. Both students and Elders articulated their desire for a different type of exchange than what typically happens in classrooms. Students wanted to ensure that our learning would not reify colonial relations, in which Elders would impart knowledge in exchange for a cheque. Further, an Elder informed me that many organisations had visited their community with the goal of fulfilling their reconciliation mandates, never to return again. They wanted to build long term relationships. And they didn’t just want to tell their stories, they wanted to hear our stories too. In response to these issues, together we created a variety of events to facilitate the reciprocal sharing of knowledge, stories, and experiences, as well as the development of respectful relationships between members of the university and the q̓ic̓əy and q̓ʷa:n̓ƛ̓ən̓ communities. Some of these initiatives included:

![Fig. 1 a A swirl of roots, plants, moss, stump, earth, and leaves in the process of growing together to form a circle. b Two distinct trees merging across boundaries and growing together](image-url)
hosting lunches for students and Elders to share a meal and spend time together; facilitating a community creek restoration project where we could care for the Land together; and organizing conference presentations where students, Elders, and faculty members could work collaboratively to develop and share ideas. I knew that our students (practicing teachers) could not visit the Elders on weekdays when they typically gathered, so I went regularly to the Elders’ centre with the goal to respect the Elders’ wishes, and with no particular expectations of what might unfold. ... (letter to Margaret, Aug. 2019)

Within this context, educational work involved being in relation—physically, emotionally and spiritually—and it was from this place that teaching and learning unfolded, opening up new worlds of possibilities for all involved.

**Educational work as distributed**

Consistent with the understanding of community engagement as process rather than product (Moore, 2014), organising events which brought members of the university and the q̓íc̓əy̓, q̓ʷa:n̓ƛ̓ən̓, and Skwxwú7mesh communities together to create opportunities for learning, shifted much of our work as educators from creating and delivering curriculum to collaboratively envisioning and creating cross-community spaces where learning could unfold. In these spaces, educational work was no longer carried by the instructor, but was co-constituted within specific educative assemblages as learners and community members also became teachers, and intra-actions with forests, longhouses, trees, and salmon were inherently pedagogical. For example, when weaving with cedar was used in the Skwxwú7mesh program as inspiration for weaving stories during the writing of the capstone projects, students and instructors re-connected educational work to the land and the deeper meaning of gifts of knowledge and knowledge making practices. In these cases, the relationships are not only with each other and with place, but also to the learning. Here the collective opens up space, time and the materials to learn together.

We are learning that when educational work moves into community, it has the potential to become a living ongoing relationship among people and place. Informed by local Indigenous worldviews in which work is situated within relational ethics (Jacobs, 2010; Kelly, 2013), guided by formal agreements (such as the ARC and MOU), and located within a time of reconciliation, pedagogical relationships within these MEd programs flowed holistically through the ecology of place, exceeding the student–teacher connections, to involve community broadly defined to include the more-than-human. Like Fitzgerald et al. (2020), we are finding that journeying and learning together is more important than projected outcomes of the programs.

**The un/bounding of educational work in community spaces**

**Educational work as rhizomatic and responsive**

As a result of our experiences as university educators collaborating within communities, including schools and daycares (Hill et al., 2019; MacDonald, 2009;
MacDonald & Hill, 2018; MacDonald et al., 2017, 2020; Moore & MacDonald, 2013), our work has involved the exciting challenge of delving into areas beyond our usual scholarly expertise, thinking across disciplinary knowledge, and enacting hybrid pedagogical practices. These experiences intensified within our MEd programs co-constructed with Indigenous communities, as our work unfolded in rhizomatic and indeterminant ways.

When I began the work with the MEd cohort, my role was relatively bounded, based on my scholarly expertise in teacher education. Meeting Elders, particularly Rick Bailey of q̓ic̓əy Nation, who educated our class about the salmon crisis in the Fraser watershed, shifted my work in unimaginable ways. Councillor Bailey taught us that the sockeye are his brothers, and his family is no longer coming home. Rick asked us to plant trees along creeks, to create more shade to offset the impact of global warming and lower the temperature of the Fraser River, which is becoming lethal for salmon. This experience of being with Rick at the river in the absence of the salmon that should have been there but weren’t, combined with the Indigenous principles of relational ethics (see Kirkness & Barnhardt, 1991) that we were learning alongside our students, pushed my work in a different direction. Rick and I applied for a grant to bring our communities together to care for salmon through planting trees. I found that my existing knowledge base as an educator was inadequate to facilitate students’ learning, and my expertise felt one dimensional and insufficient. I began reading research about riparian restoration and salmon endangerment, and learning as much as I could about the local watershed and salmon migration. The pedagogy of creek restoration has become the centre of my research agenda as I find ways to align my university responsibilities with Rick’s vision to care for salmon (see Hill et al., 2021a, 2021b). (Letter to Margaret, April, 2020)

As our work as university educators is diffracted through community spaces, we jump disciplinary boundaries, and our academic responsibilities of teaching,
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research and service become blurred. In this regard we are influenced by the scholarship of Braidotti (2011) and her nomadic theory, which aligns with the emergent and fluid nature of our work within community spaces. Nomadic scholars embody unboundedness, as they traverse through multiple subject positions and disciplinary spaces, making situated connections to address current issues (Braidotti, 2011). This does not preclude however, “seasonal patterns of movement through rather fixed routes” (Braidotti, 2011, p. 57). For us, nomadic scholarship is an attempt to dance within the spaces in-between familiarity and newness as scholars, and extending our educational work into new terrain.

The work of university educators that unfolds within community spaces requires a new type of expertise for faculty, involving the development of capacities as much as the broadening of knowledge, enabling instructors to work across and in-between paradigms within particular relational fields. As Ingold (2011) contends, what distinguishes an expert from a novice is not more content knowledge but rather a “greater sensitivity to cues in the environment and a greater capacity to respond to these cues with judgment and precision” (p. 161). We have come to understand our goals as educators as to journey nomadically across knowledge systems and the academic triad, to address issues that are significant locally, developing a breadth of relational expertise along a pathway of community-engaged work.

The bounding and ordering of educational work

Developing the capacities required to work across knowledge systems involves a steep learning curve for faculty, requiring the simultaneous engagement of multiple worldviews, languages, and practices (O’Meara et al., 2008). Although there is much evidence to suggest that complex problems benefit from transdisciplinary approaches (Nicolescu, 2016), and that integrated learning is foundational for preparing students for communicating across difference, navigating uncertainty, critical thinking, and problem solving (Rossing & Lavitt, 2016), this way of working may not be recognised intuitively. The breadth of nomadic scholarship is at odds with traditional standards of faculty work that involve the development of deep content knowledge in one specific area (O’Meara et al., 2008). As Rossing and Lavitt (2016) assert, “faculty reward structures, professional support, and messages from senior faculty and other academic leaders tend to limit possibilities among faculty for collaboration, integrative work, and engaged scholarship” (p. 3). These material practices can serve to narrowly define the work of university educators and create tensions for those facilitating community-engaged programs.

Although there is a greater recognition of the importance of community expertise within universities, as exemplified through the creation of new positions that cross the boundaries of knowledge systems, such as professor of practice and public scholar (Rossing & Lavitt, 2016), our experiences have illuminated the ways in which educational work continues to be bounded within the confines of the academy, even within community-based programs. For example, hiring policies often require instructors to hold university credentialing, institutional funds to present co-authored papers at conferences typically exclude community members, and grant application platforms rarely recognise Indigenous languages. These material
practices serve as agential cuts (Barad, 2007), producing differences among experts, and limiting who participates in the formal development and dissemination of knowledge within universities.

**Educational work as resisting the sacred image of the same**

Within our community-based MEd programs, we continuously question the extent to which we invite disciplinary knowledge, academic standards, and methodologies within university contexts into our teaching and learning assemblages, knowing that what counts as knowledge and knowledge production processes must be re-worked within community spaces, and diffracted through the local. This commitment was amplified within the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh MEd program, a program with the specific goal to support Indigenous resurgence. We recognise that even in these fluid community spaces we are still at risk of reproducing “the Sacred Image of Same” (Haraway, 1997, p. 273), and must actively work to resist reterritorialising (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) teaching and learning.

In our class lecture on Friday Dr. Verna Billy Minnabarriet distinguished between training Indigenous people and training using Indigenous ways. Using the work of Indigenous scholars and Indigenous methodologies (Archibald et al., 2019; Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008) Indigenous ways have been honoured in the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh program. (Margaret, inquiry journal March 2021)

The scholarship produced within community-based graduate programs does not necessarily align with the historical academic project of the incremental advancement of knowledge building on established ideas, nor is it meant to. It serves a different purpose, which must be articulated and evaluated within the community, rather than regulated by institutional standards. When this educational work, is housed within university credentialing programs there is axiological tension regarding who determines the value of community research, highlighting the fragility of scholarship that resides in the spaces-in-between.

Within community spaces, the work of faculty members and the learning of students becomes focussed on the material conditions within local places, moving across common boundaries and disrupting agential cuts (Barad, 2007) that separate disciplinary knowledges, epistemological paradigms and the academic triad. Although university policies and practices constantly threaten to reterritorialise (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) engaged educational work, these fluid and dynamic spaces hold much potential for transforming teaching, learning, and scholarship.

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4 Personal Communication March 12, 2021.
Educational work as ontological

Educational work as becoming who we need to be

If we, as White settlers, are to support our students to responding to the Truth and Reconciliation Calls to Action and work collaboratively with Indigenous communities to decolonise practices and centre Indigeneity within education, we ourselves must actively work to unsettle colonialism. As settler scholars, Battell Lowman and Barker (2015) contend, “in order to find new ways of living together respectfully on this land, Settler people need to take up the responsibility of learning about Indigenous ontologies” (p. 19). Within the context of our community-based work, our roles as teachers and learners blurred and our MEd programs became profound sites of our own learning. Cher for example, accepted the q̓ic̓əy Elders’ gracious invitation to visit regularly, attending some of their biweekly gatherings at the community centre. Over coffees, crafts and chores she participated in conversations about current issues, events, and television programs that often led to discussions about racism, residential schools, and appropriation, which were incredibly educative for her. Similarly, as evident in her journal entry included above, Margaret viewed the work of the Sḵwx̱wú7mesh Úxwumixw program as her learning too. As Moore (2014) contends, reciprocal models of community engagement involve institutional, as well as personal learning, in which university employees engage in courageous conversations “to become the people they need to be to do this work” (p. 91).

Fig. 3 Cutting-together-apart (Barad, 2007): Agential cuts of sameness and difference. a A nurse stump and a tree are entangled as they grow together. b Two halves of a stump which are both the same and distinct
Through a new materialist lens, this transformative learning is integrative and holistic. It exceeds the cognitive-rational processes commonly associated with academia to include affective, aesthetic, embodied, and incorporeal experiences, and is situated within the relational networks in which learners are entangled (Lange, 2018). This work is not contained within our formal university roles and responsibilities as it is as much ontological as epistemological, crossing personal and professional boundaries. When sitting with Elders who share the truth about the atrocities committed in residential schools or witnessing the colonial decimation of Indigenous Lands that (re)produces our privilege, our learning was visceral, deeply felt, and moved us to take action as educators and as citizens.

**Educational work as becoming response-able**

Working collaboratively with Indigenous communities, we routinely ask ourselves and each other, what is our response-ability (Barad, 2010) for decolonisation as Settlers living on stolen Lands and community-engaged educators, and what does this work require of us? For Barad (2007), our ethical response-ability is inseparable from our knowledge of and participation in the unfolding of our worlds. It takes into account the entangled nature of all things, disrupting the notion of individual agency. In this regard, response-ability is distributed across relational fields but still involves accountability. In our work within the community-based Master of Education programs, we feel we are “responsible for the cuts we help enact not because we do the choosing …, but because we are an agential part of the material becoming of the universe” (Barad, 2007, p. 178). Different material contexts produce different possibilities for action and require different ethical responses.

Dear Margaret,

Have you seen the Welcome post in Burrard inlet? It was designed and carved by James Nexw’Kalus-Xwalacktun Harry⁵ of the sḵwx̱wú7mesh Nation. It is called “Saymahmit”, the name of the səl̓ilwətaʔɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) village that was located in this spot prior to contact. According to the plaque posted by the Port Moody Ecological Society, “This post represents our community’s commitment to share the sacred responsibility of caring for these Coast Salish lands and waters, each other, and the future of all our relations. The two salmon swimming together at its center articulate how we are all salmon people and must therefore work together in ensuring a healthy home.” I am greatly impacted by the visual of the two salmon and I am working to understand what it means to live as a Salmon person according to the protocols of these Lands.

(Letter to Margaret, December, 2020)

Within this material configuration, boundaries of “self” and “other” are reconfigured through the repetition and paralleling of the two salmon. This shared

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⁵ See James Harry’s website for a visual of this house pole as well as his other work: [https://www.jamesharry.ca/](https://www.jamesharry.ca/).
responsibility to care for the land is echoed in the words of Potawatomi plant ecologist, Kimmerer (2013), who suggests that settlers should,

strive to become naturalized to place, to throw off the mindset of the immigrant. Being naturalized to place means to live, as if this is the land that feeds you, as if these are the streams from which you drink, that build your body and fill your spirit. To become naturalized is to know that your ancestors lie in this ground. (p. 214)

These agential cuts that reconfigure boundaries between settlers and Indigenous people through a shared relationship to Land, produced new ways of knowing, doing and being for us, moving us to care for the land as part of our personal and professional practice, and to have reverence for its teachings. Cher, for example is now centring much of her teaching and research on respectfully enacting Elder Rick Bailey of q̓ic̓ey Nation’s vision to care for salmon by planting trees along creeks. She also attends a weekly hən̓q̓əmin̓əm class to learn the language of the land where she lives in order to better understand local Indigenous ontologies, as well to respect the practices and protocols of this place. Yet this material practice of a white body speaking scared words that were violently extinguished from the mouths of Indigenous people is complex, and depending on the content, risks re-centering whiteness and re-constituting white privilege. As Tuck and Yang (2014) assert, “moves to innocence” (p. 1) in which settlers adopt Indigenous ways and overidentify with Indigenous communities serve to erase the impacts of colonisation. They write, “Settler fantasies of adoption alleviate the anxiety of settler un-belonging. He adopts the love of land and therefore thinks he belongs to the land” (Tuck & Yang, 2014, p. 15). As this example has illustrated, our response-ability for decolonisation as settler educators is a complex endeavour that involves acquiring new worldviews, new ways of being, and new identities, that depart from our usual understandings of ourselves. It also however, requires an attunement with and responsiveness to relational contexts, and a continuous assessment of how we are contributing to the disruption of inequities and injustices within educational assemblages, or perhaps inadvertently participating in their reproduction. This work exceeds our individual intentionality, and should be understood as a collective and distributed endeavour.

**Educational work as becoming with community without erasing difference**

These complexities permeate our roles as university educators working in community-based MEd programs developed in collaboration with Indigenous Nations. We continually ask ourselves, how do White bodies carry the work of decolonisation in ways that are honouring without appropriating, inclusive without colonising, and appreciative without becoming other? If educational work is to be transformative, categories that maintain boundaries between Indigenous and non-Indigenous producing difference, must be illuminated and ongoingly reconfigured. And yet, like the visual of the two salmon that are simultaneously the same and distinct, we must work across boundaries without erasing difference.
For the last few years, I’ve used a talking stick with pre-service and in-service students as a way to respect turns at speech during discussions and to honour Coast Salish traditions. To introduce this practice, I tell my students about the symbolism of the talking stick and what I knew of the carver Jim Yelton. I was good with my story and use of the talking stick right up until the time I was going to be teaching in the Skwxwú7mesh cohort and then it all seemed awkward. I started to think about it and question my use of it. I asked Jessie and Lisa (the Skwxwú7mesh MEd Site Assistants) if it was appropriate for me to use in class—after all I was a White settler with no claim to Indigenous culture, bringing in a talking stick. I even told them how I usually introduced it and how I used it. To my relief they both agreed it was a good thing to use in class and I had their backing. On the first day I brought it out to use during our check in circle with the Skwxwú7mesh Cohort. I felt nervous, but added to my story that I had checked with Jessie and Lisa. The students agreed we should use it for check in and it travelled around the room with each student holding it during their sharing time. Near the end of the circle it came to Joy who looked at me and said, I know Jimmy Yelton, he used to play with my brother—it feels good to hold something he carved. (Margaret—Inquiry Journal, January 2020)

Haig-Brown (2001), following the lead of Minh-ha (1993), reframes the question of settler identity when working within Indigenous communities: “The reflexive question is no longer Who am I? But When, where, how am I (so and so)?” (Minh-ha, 1993, p. 157, as cited in Haig-Brown, 2001). We build on this insight through the lens of new materiality to illuminate the ways in which we materialise as individuals or a collective and the implications for what is becoming in that moment. As Margaret’s journal entry (above) exemplifies, the community sanctioned use of the talking stick is an enactment of becoming together across boundaries. We endeavour to remain open as settlers and constantly re-negotiate these practices as relational fields shift and change. In this regard, the work of reconciliation and decolonisation, and the learning within educational programs is taken up by communities, rather than individuals and is always an act in the making and never complete.

**Concluding thoughts**

When educational work resides within community, it diffracts as new materials reconfigure the curricular flow, and agential cuts are re-worked, disrupting who (or what) becomes teacher and who is understood as learner. This research has illuminated how educational work changes and morphs within the context of community-based and Indigenously informed Master’s programs, to produce learning that is envisioned and carried by communities (broadly defined to include place), rather than developed and delivered by bounded individuals. When community-engaged

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6 See [http://www.authenticindigenous.com/artists/jim-yelton](http://www.authenticindigenous.com/artists/jim-yelton).
educational work becomes a site for being in relation, as opposed to developing strategic relationships, opportunities for learning, growth, action, and research become abundant. In these spaces, educational work becomes a continuous living relationship among people and place, requiring a new type of faculty expertise that is transdisciplinary, involves an attunement with, as well as a responsiveness to, the contexts in which we teach (Kelly, 2013), and unfolds across the triad of academic responsibilities. As diffracted through community, our educational work, especially in the MEd courses we have discussed here in this article, has become increasingly nomadic, as we inhabit multiple knowledge systems and embody new ways of being.

Working in a community-engaged university during an era of reconciliation requires the unsettling of colonial belief systems and practices, which exceeds professional learning focussing on the mastery of a body of knowledge to include ontological shifts, and deepened ethical commitments. Central to our ethical responsibility as settlers is reworking agential cuts that separate our work as educators from that of activists. For us, this has become one of the most important aspects of our roles as university educators. It has pushed our academic work into the spaces in-between and beyond the typical faculty responsibilities, and has encouraged us to see our work as a form of scholarly activism. The root of the word activism is the Latin word “actus,” meaning “a doing.” Teaching in community-based and Indigenous informed Master’s programs has indeed, for us, involved a doing. We understand this work as akin to living theory research (Whitehead, 2020), in which we endeavour to intentionally align our teaching, research, and service with our commitments to respectfully supporting Indigenous resurgence, sovereignty, and Land rights. When scholars take responsibility to enact teaching and research in line with these commitments, such as situating student learning around the restoration of Indigenous lands as directed by those communities, the boundaries between educational work and activism are reconfigured.

Our educational work within community-engaged contexts is much ontological as epistemological and requires continuous identity work as we locate, as well as trouble, our place within this work as White settlers. Through this process, we are coming to understand our response-abilities to become with community, and to continuously interrogate how our identities are constituted in the moment of becoming and the implications of such shifts. By examining who, when, where and how we are becoming (Haig-Brown, 2001) in relationships with Indigenous students, colleagues, and communities, we can be mindful of the contexts in which we are constituted as guests of the Nations or part of a collective, and where our whiteness might be privileged or centred in harmful ways.

Examining the agential cuts (Barad, 2007) that produce various enactments of teacher, learner, curriculum, and knowledge within university-community contexts disrupts singular notions of how educational work should be enacted, and creates openings for diverse understandings of what counts as teaching, learning, and knowing. This research has demonstrated how reconfiguring the agential cuts by moving university programs into communities can create new possibilities for inclusive, respectful and holistic education. Identifying the boundary making practices and hierarchical ordering inherent within the university assemblages that co-constitute hiring decisions, grant allocations, student admissions, methodological
commitments, conference funding, and faculty promotion, provides awareness of the inequities and exclusions that they produce. Although institutional practices constantly threaten to reterritorialise (Deleuze & Guattari, 1987) community-based educational work, these fluid and dynamic spaces hold much potential for transforming teaching and learning. As our MEd projects come to an end, we share our living stories of our work as university educators situated with diffracted landscapes within and beyond the academy in hopes of creating openings for others.

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