

**Re-Imagining Education and Curriculum Development through Embodied Learning as a
Decolonizing Pedagogy**

By

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Abstract

The aim of this article to encourage innovation in education and schooling by embracing embodied ways of knowing. The research questions addressed in this paper are: How is embodied learning conceptualized? And how might it be employed as a decolonizing pedagogy for curriculum development? This article will review the current understandings of embodied learning within the field of education. Examples of innovative approaches for employing embodied ways of knowing in teaching and learning will be provided to argue for the need to implement approaches to integrate embodied learning into curriculum. Embodied ways of knowing have considerable potential to contribute to re-envisioning ways that education can be transformed to address current challenges of colonial oppression by shifting dominant discourses and single worldviews of what education should be.

Keywords: Embodied learning, Decolonization, Curriculum development, Pedagogy

1.0 Introduction

Although the body has been a subject for art, culture, and sculpture, it has been continually excluded from traditional classrooms and courses (Bresler, 2004; Hart, 2017). Knowledge from the body has been ignored, mistrusted, and marginalized in curriculum and the body has mainly been considered useful as a space for the brain (Shahjahan, 2015). This is to say nothing of even greater lack of regard for emotional and spiritual dimensions of learning (Dei, 2013; Wilson, 2008). In Western society and academia, the body is deemed less-than and student instruction and evaluation is based on cognitive assessment.

Western educational frameworks have been structured to privilege and promote the superiority of intellectual methods for learning and knowing. This comes at the expense of traditional knowledge and wisdom and has long enforced the separation of mind and body in education. The field of education is beginning to recognize the value of using alternative learning approaches and their potential for social science research. One approach that is producing encouraging results as a current trend for decolonizing education are embodied learning practices. Embodied learning theories emphasize and explore the body's involvement and significance in the process of generating knowledge and facilitating learning. Embodied scholarship challenges Eurocentric approaches and assumptions to present exciting and innovative directions for the future of education theory and practice. Researchers in the field of adult education have used embodied learning theories as part of initiatives for decolonization, for the exploration of lived experience, and for examination of social relations of power. This area of scholarship has the potential to re-imagine education and schooling and to support systemic changes grounded in local indigenous knowledge.

This paper aims to encourage innovation in education and schooling by embracing embodied ways of knowing. Two research questions are significant to advancing this understanding. What is embodied learning? And how is embodied learning to be employed as a decolonizing pedagogy? Answering these questions is significant for encouraging discussions and further exploration into understand embodied learning in the context of adult education and ignite thinking of ways to be innovative in education and schooling so as to break dominant discourses and practices that are creating separation and inequalities.

This paper begins by discussing why there is a need for embodied learning in curriculum and pedagogy for decolonizing education and present some background and context of the central issues that challenge and undermine bringing embodied learning into classrooms and curriculum. It will then explore and seek to define what is meant by embodied learning by reviewing current understandings of embodied learning within the field of education. Examples of innovative approaches for employing embodied ways of knowing in teaching and learning will be provided to argue for the need for more integration of embodied learning into curriculum.

2.0 Embodied Ways of Teaching and Learning are Needed to Decolonize Education

Our ways of learning and making meaning of the world have been restricted by cognitive biases and colonial legacies for a long time. This is what I mean by decolonization. I mean healing the mind-body split and exploring more diverse ways of learning. Reconnecting mind, body, emotions, and spirit in education will shift us away from colonial frameworks (Shahjahan, 2015). But before this can happen, we must interrogate our taken-for-granted ways of learning and challenges to embracing embodied ways of knowing.

Teaching and learning have been fashioned to align with the image of Western industrialized nations and exclude other voices and diverse perspectives (Marginson and Molis, 2001). Western culture has for a long time privileged the mind over the body (Clarke, 2005; Ng, 2006). As a result, knowledge from the body has been ignored, mistrusted, delegitimized, and marginalized (Shahjahan, 2015). This is recognizable in Western educational frameworks which are structured to privilege the superiority of intellectual methods for learning (Shonstrom, 2020). Encouraging the inclusion of the body back into learning defies engendered colonial norms and challenges Western academic models built on rationalism and cognitive imperialism that privilege the mind over the body and other senses (Ergas, 2014; Sodhi and Cohen, 2011; Wong and Batacharya, 2018). As Shajahan (2015) so aptly writes, “bringing awareness to our bodies helps us acknowledge and dismantle hegemonic knowledge systems the privilege the mind” (p. 489).

Western epistemological origins are steeped in colonial binaries. A binary means a separation of two constructs from one another, which often creates a hierarchy of one construct over the other that perpetuates separation, inequity, and exclusion. Cartesian dualism, also called the Cartesian worldview, is an example of a binary, and one of the most frequently cited impediments scholars

face in bringing embodied ways of knowing into the Western academic world (Ergas, 2014; Wong and Batacharya, 2018). The Cartesian worldview, so named because it hails from the work of Rene Descartes, promoted separation between mind and body (e.g., Jarvis, 2005; Wong and Batacharya, 2018). However, this idea was originally put forth in ancient Greek philosophy with Platonic dualism, which posited a separation between mind and body would strengthen logic and reason (Bresler, 2004; Shonstrom, 2020). The mind/body split implies that intellect is distinct and superior to all other ways of knowing and makes the body suspect, ignored, and delegitimized (Clarke, 2005; Jarvis, 2005; Shahjahan, 2015). In the context of colonization, Cartesian dualism was supported by the Europeans because it was purportedly based on divine reason (Quijano, 2007).

Understanding this background and context is important to devising ways for advancing embodied learning in the academy and beyond. Until the systems and forms of colonization are identified so that it can be reflected upon and discussed critically, educators cannot conceptualize or construct curriculum approaches to dismantle them. This understanding further supports the need for embodied learning approaches in curriculum to transform educational system. For such approaches a conceptual understanding of embodied learning is required which is the focus of the next section.

3.0 How to Conceptualise Embodied Learning

The field of embodied scholarship is vast and complex (Shornstrom, 2020). There are many views on embodiment; however, a key element to these theories is that they recognize the body as a source of knowledge and legitimize the body in learning processes (Clarke, 2005). Embodied learning theories recognize the body as a significant site of learning and source of knowledge (Clarke, 2005, Wagner and Shahjan, 2015). Understanding embodied learning requires an “exploration of a more holistic pedagogical endeavour that explicitly acknowledges the interconnectedness of mind, body, emotion, and spirit in the construction and pursuit of knowledge.” (Ng, 2018, p. 33). A major goal through embodied learning is reclaiming the wholeness of the learner (Clarke, 2005) refers to this conception of holistic ways of learning that are relational (Wong and Batacharya, 2018). This is why these theories are also called ‘whole person learning’ as they understand the body and mind as a unified system of consciousness (Hart, 2017).

Relationality, which is inherent to Indigenous worldviews, is important for conceptualizing and embracing embodied learning. Embracing a relational paradigm can help one notice asymmetrical power structures (Starblanket and Stark, 2018). Through relationality, we better understand our relationships with one another and with the environment and our responsibilities. In educational contexts, this means that one can become perceptive to imbalances in learning approaches, such as those that privilege cognitive learning over all other forms of learning. An understanding of relationality is lacking in Western systems which are overarchingly based on separation, hierarchies, and individualism (Little Bear, 2000). This kind of knowledge, reframing and recentering would be invaluable to redesigning curriculum and decolonizing educational contexts.

Indigenous research methods are well suited to studying embodied ways of knowing (Dei, 2013). Contrary to Western-centric approaches, In Indigenous research, “all kinds of knowledge are important and necessary” (Simpson, 2014, p. 17) which can help deepen discussions about embodiment and embodied subjectivity. Indigenous epistemologies recognize physical, mental, emotional, and spiritual learning experiences (Dei, 2013). As such, Indigenous research methodologies encourage and require one to bring one’s whole being to the research journey, which differs radically from Western research methodologies (Simpson, 2011). Unfortunately, many scholars in Western academia have limited knowledge of Indigenous worldviews or how to respectfully engage with Indigenous research methodologies. This is because Indigenous scholarship and voices have been excluded from academic discourse and literature, again owing to systematic oppression and exclusion of colonial systems of knowledge production (Smith, 1999). Further research and scholarship into embodied learning will benefit from prioritizing Indigenous knowledge and theories of embodiment to better understand and implement this type of learning in curriculum more effectively.

4.0 Embodied Learning in Classrooms and Curriculum

What might this look like for curriculum design? This is a key question about how we can re-imagine our spaces of teaching and learning to be more diverse and decolonial. In the first place, there must be an intentionality for a decolonizing praxis. It has been said that “moving the body may help open the mind” (Hart, 2017, p. 310). In practice in the classroom, embodied learning

methods have been shown to improve students' cognitive abilities and academic achievement (e.g., Panagiotis et al., 2018). Courses that encourage sensitivity and embeddedness within nature and the environment, such as place-based education or land-based learning, constitute a critical aspect of embodiment (Hart, 2017). Encouraging and creating space for students to spend more time outside and creating conditions and meaningful learning opportunities outdoors is one step towards change. Introducing mindfulness and other activities into classrooms spaces as an anti-oppressive has been done to help students recognize conceptually and emotionally the relationality of their existence and come to a deeper and more present states of knowing and being (Shahjahan, 2015).

There is a tremendous need for embodied learning as anti-oppressive pedagogy in classrooms and curriculum to disrupt Eurocentric systems and processes of design in education (Wagner and Shahjahan, 2015). Bringing the body back into learning defies engendered colonial norms and challenges Western academic models built on rationalism and cognitive imperialism that privilege the mind over the body and other senses (Ergas, 2014; Sodhi and Cohen, 2011; Wong and Batacharya, 2018). Educators should not be intimidated to explore options and opportunities for partnerships with experts in their community.

5.0 Recommendations for Practice

Embodied learning practices can be incorporated into curriculum as single standalone activities or more fully incorporated as part of the subject matter (OECD, 2018). This might mean incorporating a short mindfulness or meditation component, movement practice or activity or simple stretch breaks into classes to help students connect their bodies and their minds and engage more fully with the moment and learning reality (Hrash, 2021; Joseph and Kerr, 2021; Wagner and Shahjahan, 2015). Holding classes outside, on the land is a way to create more engagement, encourages learners to think about their connection to the land on which they learn, work and live and thereby creates connection between humans and the more-than-human world (Cupchik and Schnarr, 2022). This is also a method that challenges the established colonial knowledge systems that see learning that should be isolated to mental activities and confined within classroom spaces.

In terms of integration into curriculum and school subjects Joseph and Kerr (2021) discuss how the integration of physical exercise or cultural movements can support memory. Macedonia (2019) provides two key examples of this recommendation in practice – one for language learning, where movements are attached to words; and the other for mathematics, where mathematics was combined with dance.

The OECD (2018) advises teachers consider their expertise and comfort with facilitating embodied learning activities. Where educators are unsure or inexperienced community collaboration or reaching out to experts or colleagues. Another suggestion is to build relationships and collaborate with Indigenous knowledge keepers in curricula design and development (Cupchik and Schnarr, 2022). This would be consistent with what Batacharya (2011) notes in that there is need for caution against cultural appropriation and for respectful engagement with embodied practices from other culture.

It should not be surprising that educators and researchers encounter resistance and struggle to introduce and gain support and appreciation for their attempts to introduce embodied learning into schools and the academy. Embodied learning and teaching practices and research do not align with or fit into Western colonial systems of knowledge production and introducing embodied learning approaches and practices into classrooms can be unsettling both for teachers and students (Wagner and Shahjahan, 2015). In response, Macedonia (2019) makes the recommendation for curriculum innovation to explore creating learning contexts which allow both “brain-based” learning and embodied learning. This is supported by Joseph and Kerr (2021) who write that the objective should not be to replace all “static learning” with “embodied learning” but rather “enable new lines of flight in education by querying the relationships among materialities, ideologies, evaluations, and representations and embracing embodied and socioecological complexities” (p. 419).

As new approaches using embodied learning in curriculum will be unfamiliar and may be uncomfortable to some, in order to reduce potential resistance, it is important that educators clearly explain the pedagogical approach and the rationale behind their decision to incorporate embodied practices into classrooms (Hrsch, 2001). It is also suggested that educators engage in critical reflection to guide their practice and facilitate the improvement of learning outcomes and learners’ experiences (Cupchik and Schnarr, 2022). While it will take effort there is nevertheless

a need to embrace our discomfort if we honestly and whole-heartedly seek to make a change for honouring diversity in how educational systems and curricula are structured.

6.0 Conclusion

Embodied learning is a current trend in education that is building momentum. Evidence is still limited on the impact of embodied learning and more discussion and further research is needed (Panagiotis et al., 2018). Embracing embodied ways of learning, being and doing encourages honouring diversity in cultural differences and diversity of ways of knowing which is significant for curriculums that aim to disrupt colonial systems that normalize and perpetuate oppression. Community support within academia is needed for more diverse scholarship – particularly for Indigenous ways of knowing – to help create spaces where embodied learning can be freely accepted and incorporated into curriculum development.

This article presented an argument in favour of the incorporation of embodied learning into curriculum developing. Understanding the roots of colonial systems which perpetuate the superiority of the intellect and rational thought over other ways of knowing and being in the world illuminated the need for exploring alternative ways of teaching and learning as decolonizing pedagogies. A conceptualization of embodied learning is needed before it can be effectively utilized in curriculum development. This article presented both definitions and some examples of embodied learning as decolonizing pedagogy. It was made clear through this discussion that not all embodied learning can be considered decolonizing pedagogy. There must be an underlying intent towards decolonization.

Embracing embodied ways of knowing requires new relationships to be built in classroom spaces, with our teaching, and in our learning. Understanding embodied learning as a decolonizing praxis has considerable potential to contribute to re-envisioning ways education can be transformed to dismantle interlocking systems of colonial oppression by shifting dominant discourses and single worldviews. This area of scholarship presents exciting possibilities to re-imagine educational methods and support changes grounded in local indigenous knowledge that will encourage greater diversity and representation in learning contexts. Further research, scholarship, discussion, and recognition of methods for embodied teaching and learning is needed and will benefit curriculum development to encourage decolonizing education. This will

come from bringing theory into practice and which will then provide more content for discussion and future directions in research. It is hoped that the recommendations made in this article will provide a starting point for work surrounding the implementation of embodied learning in curriculum and that provides more equitable participation, engagement and respect for different sources of knowledge and ways of doing, learning and being in the world.

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