Witnessing as Classroom Pedagogy by Greg Sutherland

Witnessing is not a new pedagogy—in fact, it has been an honored pedagogy since time immemorial among the Coast Salish people. It was, however, new to me back in 2016, when I was first invited to be a witness. At the time, I was a graduate student attending a lecture series on reconciliation and restorative justice, so I was rightfully trepidatious to speak my truth in front of faculty members from SFU, fellow doctoral students, and of elders from the xʷməθkwəy̓əm(Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), Sə́lílwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) and q̓íc̓əy̓ (Katzie) First Nations. However, I took some solace in the fact that the role of the witness is, as the name implies, to simply witness—which is hard to do wrong. Of course, this is a gross oversimplification of a powerful pedagogy. I will try to do justice to witnessing as a classroom pedagogy by articulating my understanding of its use in Coast Salish Ceremony, some of its critical and axiological efficacies, and how I have come to use it in the classroom.

Disclaimer:
I should strongly preface the following explanation of this protocol by saying that this is not a protocol of my people (I am Métis of Cree ancestry), so I can only speak to my understanding of it and hope that I don't get it wrong. I feel as though I have a little wiggle room here because expressing one's own understanding of something is a foundational part of witnessing itself. I should also add that I have had many students who are indigenous to this area of the world who appreciated my use of this protocol.

My Understanding of the Protocol:
In many Coast Salish First Nations, at the start of a significant gathering or ceremony, a number of witnesses are called, who are invited to attend to what they see, hear, feel, and think about what is said and done throughout the course of the gathering. These witnesses are called publicly by the hosts, gifted, and honored for their important role at the outset of the gathering. These witnesses are then called upon at the end of the gathering to speak to their experience and then take those teachings out into the world.

Other-directed:
Witnessing reminds us of an important truth: that our own experience of a moment is neither the only one, nor the definitive one. Western philosophy and science will confirm this to be true; however, we need to be reminded of this sometimes. We cannot help but feel as though we got it right, so others who experienced something differently must have somehow got it wrong. Inviting others to share their truth with us, alerts us to our own biases and privilege and reminds us that we all have our own truths.

Call to Action:
Being called as witness is also a call to action. It is not merely enough to observe what is happening—to sit and take it all in. Instead, what is expected of a witness is to take what they have learned in this role out beyond the confines of the gathering and to try to employ these teachings in the betterment of the earth. A witness should not gather knowledge, but hold it so that it can be shared with others so that the teachings live on beyond the gathering. Witnessing, like many Indigenous protocols is as concerned with axiological matters as epistemological or ontological ones.

Use in the Classroom:
I started using this protocol in my classroom when I was teaching in the Indigenous Perspectives Teacher Education Module at Simon Fraser University. I began calling three students to be witnesses at the start of each day and then asking them to share any of their experiences of the day when we were wrapping-up at the day's end. This proved to be somewhat successful, but I was never entirely happy with my use of the protocol. Returning to the classroom this September, I wanted to do a better job, so I structured it a little differently.

Classroom Structure:

Here is what I do now: 1) following land acknowledgement on Mondays, I invite two students to be our witnesses. 2) I give each witness the gift of a quarter, thank them for the important work ahead. 3) I offer the whole class a "teaching" to think about for the week—sometimes it is a picture book, sometimes it is a reading from literature, sometimes it is an oral story. 4) On Fridays, we call upon the witnesses to share their experience of the week. 5) the class thanks the witnesses for their words (usually by lifting their hands to them). So far, I have employed this protocol with my grade twelve students and my grade nine students and on the whole, I have been very impressed with student responses. In fact, I would suggest that this protocol would be effective for any grade or any subject.

Impact:

Some witnessed shared connections between the weekly teaching and the unit that we are working on, while others have made connections between the teaching and things they have experienced in other classes, and some simply talk about what they learned during the week. I'm writing this article on a Friday afternoon, shortly after a couple of students in my Language Arts 9 class witnessed for us. One witness spoke about the connections that he had made between a vignette by Richard Wagamese (from his book *One Story, One Song*) that I shared with the class on Monday and a Ted Talk by Sherry Turkle that we had watched and two short stories that we had read. He mainly talked about how this all reminded him of times that he spent camping with his father. The other witness talked about how they had made new friends this semester and how they were proud of how they were doing in math class. It was quite beautiful. This protocol is deeply pedagogical and potentially cross-curricular and I would encourage you to try it on. Please let me know it has worked for you and your students.

Epilogue:

Weeks after I wrote this article, I was attending a conference on Indigenous scholarship and I spoke with Elder and Knowledge-keeper, Shane Pointe from the xʷməθkwəy̓əm nation about this protocol. I asked him about it because I love speaking to him, but also because, earlier that week, a colleague had asked about the appropriateness of calling witnesses in the classroom—if we, as teachers, can or should do so. He responded very positively about how I have been using this protocol and cautioned that it should not be used as review in any way. Instead, it should always be relational and open-ended.