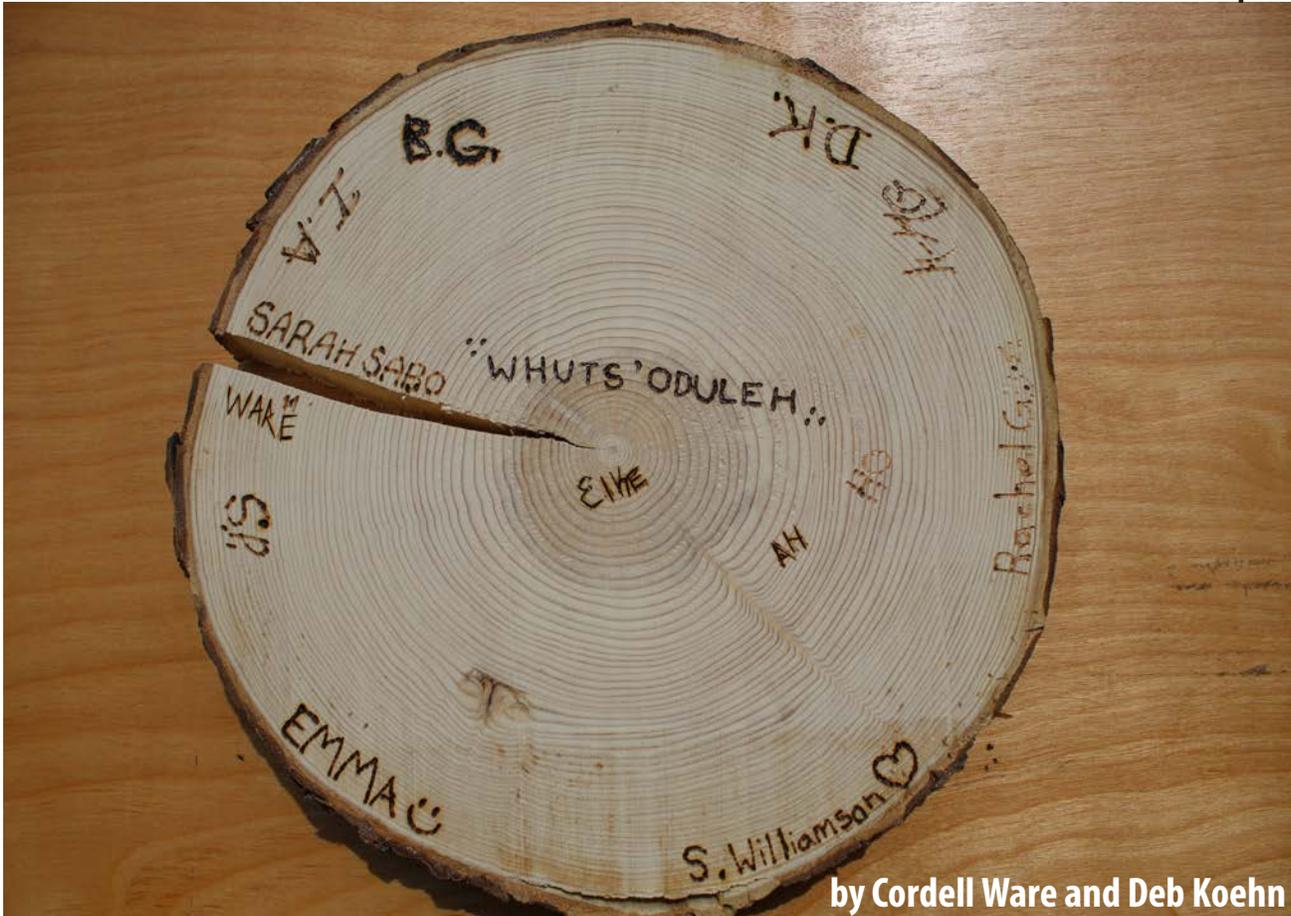


Whuts'oduleh Learning in a Group



by Cordell Ware and Deb Koehn

Learners burned their names into a locally harvested log round as a lasting tribute to their day of learning.

The word that is the title of this story of learning, *Whuts'oduleh*, is a Dakelh word gifted to Cordell Ware, a young enthusiastic leader and professional learner by Irene Antoine, an Elder from Nak'azdli Whut'en and Shirley Pierre, and elder from TI'azt'en Nation, to describe the learning taking place in the community. Each member of this unique space is equally heard and comes together to envision the possibilities for the learning. The space honors all voices and perspectives, viewing self and others as equals as they move learning forward. This space is unique. The majority of those present are learners described by our educational system as being in grades 9 to 12. They have moved beyond this narrow descriptor and simply define themselves as learners – as do the Community Elders, the District Personnel, and the certified teachers. Everyone in the room is an equal, entering into a space designed to create a democratic learning experience. Each member of this learning community is ready to explore alternatives equally, presenting different perspectives and knowledge about the learning process as it relates to them as individuals and as a group member. Our day of co-creation or whuts'oduleh begins with the unpacking of the *First Peoples Principles of Learning*, a grounding activity that helps define how we will be as learners, interacting and supporting each member on their unique journey. We move into groups, looking at all aspects, and reflecting on what they mean to us, how they will support us today and on our future learning journey.

On this day, in early June, learners are beginning to plan their learning journey for the upcoming year. Cordell does not call himself the teacher or an educator. He refers to himself as a professional learner who desires to learn with and from all other members of the learning community. He engages



One of the student learners describes his upcoming learning journey while Elders, students and staff appreciatively listen.

with his students in co-creating all aspects of the learning space and culture to best support one another. Cordell's purpose has shifted, and he is no longer driven by the curriculum. Instead, with each student he examines the curriculum – students have their own copy of the BC curriculum in various content areas from which they will be designing their learning. Students are identifying the big ideas that connect them to previous learning experiences or those that raise curiosity and wonder. Cordell and his co-learner discuss possible interests, and involve other students that have already had a similar learning journey. Although the discussion takes place between Cordell and a specific student, others chime in, describing questions that developed for them around similar curriculum content, or recommending a resource (including human resources) that

could support the learning journey. The students take a closer look at the Curriculum content, asking questions around what does it mean? What will this look like and how will they demonstrate their knowledge? The conversation shifts, from meeting the Social Studies learning outcomes into a cross-curricular conversation. Students deeply dive into curriculum pages from English Language Arts, Science, and mathematics. The Community Elders are moving from student to student, asking them questions, providing names of community members who can contribute to the learning, or local places in the community to visit. District personnel connect the learners to ongoing district projects and learners on other sites. Conversations deepen around possibilities of what will be learned, how it will be learned, and how assessment will take place.

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When needed, students move out of the space, into conversations with other adult learners around the school building – asking them to consider a proposal and ways that assessment around learning can be cross-curricular. With the support of the professional learner, students are designing the possibilities for the upcoming years' learning

The principal, Craig Houghton, participates in these conversations, assuring students that their learning around course designs will be honored, and letting students know that they are district learning leaders. District teachers who are present make connections between curriculum designs and classrooms in other parts of the district with whom these students will be sharing the learning. The actions are not confined to the learning space, but it becomes apparent that the learning space is highly flexible and shifting from physical position, depending on learners' needs.

The adults holding teacher certificates that are just being introduced to this process are interacting with this group of students, aged 13 to 17, and the adults are feeling vulnerable *and* amazed as these students lead the learning. Everyone in the room is an authentic learner, there is no one expert, each member of this community is an expert in who they are as learners, and the strengths and challenges that they bring to their learning journey each day. Cordell has used the principles of Design Thinking with his students – and they have designed a new way of being. The students demonstrate an open mindset and Cordell uses a quote from Richard Wagamese (2016) to describe his thinking about shifting the title of teacher to

co-creator, or professional learner: *Life is sometimes hard. There are challenges. There are difficulties. There is pain. As a younger man, I sought to avoid pain and difficulty and only caused myself more of the same. These days, I choose to face life head-on – and I have become a comet. I arc across the sky of my life and the hard times are the friction that shaves off the worn and tired bits. The more I travel head-on, the more I am shaped, and the things that no longer work or are unnecessary drop away. It's a good way to travel. I believe eventually I will wear away all resistance, until all that's left of me is light. (Embers, pg. 133)*

Cordell's transformation of his own mindset has created transformative mindsets and possibilities for recreation for the students. The new model of education that he and his students have co-created requires professional and student learners to come together as equals and create a shared passion for learning and growth. It is how all areas of the learning space are managed, including feedback, goals, course design, assessment, and communicating student learning. Learning is designed by both the professional and the student learner. This educational shift has led to enriched feedback that becomes the focus and fuel for student goals. Students are expected to participate in self, peer, and professionally led assessment and use the assessment to develop their personal best. Understanding the goals allows everyone to focus on the next steps in learning and creates the connection to the curriculum. Co-creating course plans may seem like the most challenging aspect

of this process but it is this step that allows students to understand the connection and purpose of the learning. Students and professional learners need to focus on individual growth, partnered with the courage to be honest. A student reflected, "I find I know more about my own learning and (self assessment and co-created assessment) that helps me grow as a learner".

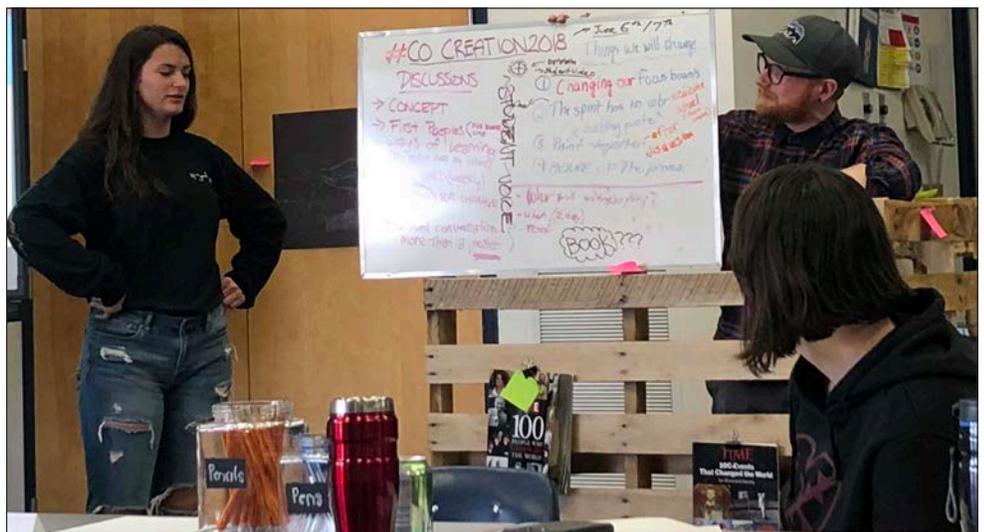
There is power felt in this learning community. The power is each learner taking up the challenge to be more of a leader, more of a change maker, and more of a connected conductor of learning in the community.

This may be seen as an alternative classroom, but that name fails to describe the reality. A few of the students are not successful in other classrooms. They may choose

not to participate in typical group lessons, or complete homework assignments. In this learning space, they have chosen an authentic path for their education. They are the change makers in this school. They are thoughtful about their learning, know why they choose to learn, and are able to discuss strategies and skillsets in a way that reflects deep understanding. They understand themselves as learners and they are truthful about the choices that they make. They envision a different way, understanding that learning does not have to be defined by what the person at the front of the room thinks you ought to know, but is led by purposeful learning. They are lucky to be in the right place at the right time with a professional learner who is curious about the process of learning.

Cordell Ware has just completed his third year of teaching. He completed his practicums in Gold River and Burns Lake and is thrilled to be working in beautiful Fort St. James. He has a passion for rural schools and improving educational practice. He is currently working on a Masters degree in Educational Leadership, at Vancouver Island University. Co-creation has become the central focus of his work and teaching.

As one of three Nechako Lakes' Inquiry Support Teachers, **Deb Koehn** is privileged to learn alongside inspirational teachers like Cordell Ware. Deb is also an instructor at UNBC in the School of Education, and at VIU in the Education Masters Program. Deb is honoured to be continually learning alongside innovative educators in places that create belonging.



A student and Cordell explain how they developed the co-creation of curriculum event. Student voice initiated the event, students participated in the planning of what co-created learning could look like, and led the learning.