

Teaching from Song: a recipe for preparation

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Linguists, language teachers, and linguistic anthropologists who focus on Salish languages often have the privilege of bringing tape-recordings of songs and stories to their students in the classroom. Learning the protocols for such sharing of the treasured gifts of ancestors is made easier by the good examples of our teachers in and out of the classroom, who share such gifts as part of their own teaching. I use this paper to make explicit some teaching practices that “go without saying” as they are modeled by *taqʷšəblu*, Vi Hilbert. This paper is a reflecting back of what I am learning to my own teacher, and is written in response to one of my own student’s wishes¹ that such good examples could be more widely shared, and consciously articulated in the literature on educational practice.

Many of us who teach in the area of Salish languages and traditions have been given permission to share taped recordings of privately-owned songs and stories, and photographs and videos in the classroom with our students. In informal discussion, some educators speaking at the 2000 Conference for the Canadian Indigenous and Native Studies Association expressed their trepidation regarding the presentation of such materials from their own areas of expertise, in the classroom. Even where they had been given permission by members of their home communities to present such materials, the context of the classroom was found to be one that required an additional set of concerns to be negotiated.

In face-to-face interaction with a singer, audience members can often take explicit direction from the singer, with regard to how they might stand, or sit, or otherwise respectfully attend to, and participate in, the event. Audience members in face-to-face interaction with a singer can also assume that the singer can exercise some degree of autonomy in choosing to give voice to a particular song, or not, when in their midst. Within the classroom, where the song is audited from a tape recording, the expectations of a song’s owners or performers might not be as clear. Cultural conventions ordinarily associated with classroom learning may not be in accord with those of song presentation. Note-taking, for example, might ordinarily be seen as a reasonable display of attentiveness for a

¹ This paper is dedicated to the memory of Catherine Francis Sewell. A former student, an educator in the School of Native Studies at the University of Alberta, Cathy is also fondly remembered as a singer— a founding member of the Aboriginal vocal group, Asani (in Cree, “The Rock”).

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student in a classroom setting, whereas taking notes while listening to a singer could imply a lack of engagement.

Some of the inherent difficulties of classroom presentation have been mitigated where locally developed curricula and textbooks have been put into place in consultation with teachers and communities (*e.g.*: the body of work developed by educator David Cort with his students at Tulalip; *see also* Cruikshank 1991). Educational organizations have also taken steps to provide guidelines for presenting traditional teachings in a manner that is culturally appropriate. For example, the University of Alaska, Fairbanks and the Alaska Native Knowledge Network (1998) have developed a set of guidelines for presentation, which provide the approved philosophy for teaching from cultural materials, and suggestions for preparation. Unfortunately, the Alaska Native Knowledge Network guidelines do not provide specifics for the working out of practice in the classroom, the very learning environment that they attempt to address. Some ethnographic studies examine communication failures in the classroom (*e.g.*: Philips 1983), but ethnographic research that explicitly examines successful practice in the teaching of cultural materials in the classroom is more difficult to locate. One notable exception to this generalization can be found in the work of Linda Goulet (2001). Goulet examined the teaching practices of two highly regarded teachers of Aboriginal students, one working in her Dene home community, and the other, a non-Aboriginal teacher working in a northern Cree community. Her research identified specific effective practices of these teachers, and noted particularly how they were able to teach the students for "responsible self-direction" (Goulet 2001:68, quoting Watt-Cloutier [2000]).

Cathy Sewell observed that educators are much in need of concrete examples of such successful practice in University classrooms (Sewell and Pocklington 2000).² In response to her request, my aim here is to make explicit a framework that allows for a respectful approach to song in the classroom, according to Lushootseed principles as I have come to understand them, with implications for presenting song from other traditions, as well. I suggest that such practices can be observed and adopted, consciously or not, when one has the privilege of learning from a good teacher in the classroom. Such practices often seem to "go without saying," but a record of them can inform and enrich the teaching practices of others not directly exposed to them. I will further suggest that exposure to such successful practices allows for an improved understanding of the meanings of the songs as extended into such contexts, and a better understanding of the discomfort many have expressed when they find that cultural materials are improperly aired or displayed.

ṭaq^hšəbly, Vi Hilbert, has sometimes shared the songs of her relatives, recorded on tape, in the Lushootseed Literature and Language classes at the University of Washington. She has done so in such a way that I have felt more at ease in sharing those recorded songs, when permitted, as well. I will begin by describing the directly observable [external] components of her practice. Here, insofar as I am capable of describing it, is what ṭaq^hšəbly modeled for us:

² See also, the experiences of aboriginal students in universities as documented through guided reflections in the work of Martin (2001) and Gorman (2001).

She let us know that before ever playing the song for us, she would have thought over why we might need to hear it.

She always prepared the way, and put us in a ready frame of mind to listen. She would tell us that we were going to hear a song, and that the song was a gift, a treasure. She would describe her familial relationship to that person, and tell us a little about what she appreciated about them.

She would then describe the purposive action of the person who had recorded the song—who they recorded it with, who they stated they had recorded it for, what the stated purpose of the song was.

She would tell us how thankful she was that someone had thought it important to record the song.

She would express gratitude that this person had recorded the song so that we could hear it.

She would discuss restrictions that might have been placed on the recording or auditing of the song, and explain why we were currently able to hear the song, and the decision that had to be carefully made by the singer to record it.

She would introduce the singer as someone present, including, where warranted, directly addressing them as a relation.

When she turned the tape recorder on, she would listen, standing quietly and attentively.

When the song was over, she would turn the tape recorder off, pause, and thank the person whose voice we had listened to.

I think we benefit from this special care in presentation in the classroom. Of such practice, Linda Akan writes,
Teaching and learning seem to be inseparable. Although the roles of teacher and learner may be clearly understood, especially in face-to-face interaction, they are also internal processes. [...] Ideally, teaching implies setting an example by being the example and carrying the message of our Ancestors."[1992:192-193]

I have always felt comfortable with ʔaq̓ʂəblu's way of doing things in the classroom. Her role as teacher, modeling a respectful stance toward song, helped make us comfortable finding our roles as students, and helped us to listen with our full attention. She would ensure that everyone was attentive and in a state of readiness to hear the song.

By ensuring that we understood that we were listening to a singer, and to that singer's song, *ḥaqʷšəblu* promoted a more direct engagement, and reminded us that songs as performed are communicative acts. They call forth a connection between singer, hearer, and focus attention on a specific location in time and space.

ḥaqʷšəblu also provided a template for future action with her way of presenting. Through presentation, she provided a set of protocols that allowed me to be in a position to listen, and, when teaching myself, to prepare my students to listen. I think the readiness and ease she fostered allowed us to be in a position to listen with mindful purpose. The protocols set up a space of possibility in which to enter into the discursive action of song. We were in a position to do so even if we didn't understand what we were being exposed to (and we can continue to learn what this is for all of our lives) because we knew that we were placed in a position of behaving respectfully by participation in the protocol. It allowed for the activation of potentials in discourse that might otherwise not be available, if the song were presented as only a record of a past event.

Implicit in this framework of action is a set of understandings about what the song, and hearing the song, can mean. As Linda Akan has said of her own her own Saulteaux teacher and grandfather, Alfred Manitopeyes, *ḥaqʷšəblu* is "setting an example by being the example and carrying the message of our Ancestors" (*ibid.*). *ḥaqʷšəblu* sets the example by being the example when she greets the one who sings on the tape. Sometimes implicitly, sometimes explicitly, the living audience is directed to understand that the song performance invites the presence of the ancestors to whom it is sung, and by whom it is sung.

Subiyay, Bruce Miller, writes that there is a silence in greeting, that "allow[s] the ancestors to visit" (1999:25). Here, in the preparation, and in *ḥaqʷšəblu*'s attentive listening, we find that silent space of acknowledgement before the spoken greeting and thanksgiving. The thanks acknowledge interlocutors in the room who may have been called back by the song. Subiyay reminds us that interlocutors may not be physically present; mindful speech and song can acknowledge and entreat those who have passed, and can also engage those yet to be born. I suggest that the point in time that the song is sung (and is sometimes tape-recorded) is only one part of the temporal frame that the singer takes into account—how those song might be apprehended in other times, reaching forward and back from the point of performance, can also be acknowledged.

The song as performed, which I endeavour to document, must also be explicated with regard to the situated meaning for the singer. By way of example, I consider here the performance of *lehel* (*slahal*, *slhel*, or "bone game") songs that I have been permitted to tape record at Alkali Lake. *Lehel* songs are acknowledged throughout what I know of Salish territory to work, in part, as entreaties for spiritual assistance in the game. The power in, or of, the songs-as-performed can manifest in unanticipated ways. In Secwepemc territory in the 1800s, the Oblate priest Father LeJac enforced prohibition at summer gatherings on the singing of songs he regarded as instruments that might draw singers away from Catholic teachings. Within his gaze, singers of *lehel* songs ostensibly sang

and played 'for amusement only,' to pass the night at funeral wakes throughout the year (*c.f.*: Whitehead 1981). At Esk'et/Alkali Lake today, wakes are the typical setting for lehel performance. For a person to sing a lehel song, whether within or outside of the context of a wake, is to activate the potential for song to call on those who have passed away for assistance in helping another over to the other side. A child found to be singing a lehel song away from a lehel game, (*i.e.*, for idle purpose) calls some Elders at Alkali Lake to an awareness that someone may be dying.³

I would suggest that scholarly inquiry into local use of song can be best approached with an assumption that all songs are part of the spiritual "work" of performers and their audiences, and while that "work" might be may not be fully understood by the scholar-as-auditor, the potential for the activation of multiple unfolding meanings is not extinguished by the physical absence of the performer, and that the potentials called to the fore may shift, and will continue to shift, over time. A recent collection of performances and of essays on songs of the First People of Washington State (Smith and Ryan 1999) makes clear that songs require our careful regard and approach, and that they continue to be part of a living tradition. The authors and singers inform us through their partially overlapping and supporting commentary that songs may be regarded as gifts received (SiJohn); as healing (Amoss and Cunningham); as something other than "music" or the product of an earthly composer, and simultaneously, as property (Haines); as prayer; as instruction to act (Timentwa and Chaimberlain). Songs can bring together people when one leaves the other (Beavert-Martin) as teachings; as greetings, to let other persons know who is entering their territory; as welcome; as requests for aid; as company; as support; and as sacred connection. Their performance can be seen as connecting us through embodied resonance, as a mutual breathing together; as a co-creation of a time and space for learning to occur (*see also* Lightning 1992).

Given the myriad ways that song can be activated, implicit in a respectful approach to song is an acknowledgement that, as part of the expression of language not moribund, but living, the meaning of song meaning can change. We can therefore also expect that the concomitant classroom experience of song and the appropriateness of its performance in that context can, and will, change.

In summary, following the good example of a teacher in the performance of a protocol of presentation that acknowledges the song, its situation, the singer, and the audience's relationship to the singer, entrains the mindful consideration of the potential of all Lushootseed songs to be prayerful entreaties—and leaves open the potential for change of meaning, and for learning on the part of all auditors. The vessel that carries the songs forward is thereby enlarged. We can thus assist with the care and packing of this new and "different canoe" by observing the helpful examples of our Elders.

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