

DAVIDSON, S.F., & DAVIDSON, R. Potlatch as Pedagogy: Learning Through Ceremony. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Portage & Main Press. (2018). 80 pp. \$26.00 (Paperback). (ISBN 978-1-55379-773-9)

Sandra Deer

Volume 56, numéro 2-3, été–automne 2021

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1096460ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1096460ar>

[Aller au sommaire du numéro](#)

Éditeur(s)

Faculty of Education, McGill University

ISSN

1916-0666 (numérique)

[Découvrir la revue](#)

Citer ce compte rendu

Deer, S. (2021). Compte rendu de [DAVIDSON, S.F., & DAVIDSON, R. Potlatch as Pedagogy: Learning Through Ceremony. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Portage & Main Press. (2018). 80 pp. \$26.00 (Paperback). (ISBN 978-1-55379-773-9)]. *McGill Journal of Education / Revue des sciences de l'éducation de McGill*, 56(2-3), 337–339. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1096460ar>



BOOK REVIEW / COMPTE-RENDU

DAVIDSON, S.F., & DAVIDSON, R. *Potlatch as Pedagogy: Learning Through Ceremony*. Winnipeg, Manitoba: Portage & Main Press. (2018). 80 pp. \$26.00 (Paperback). (ISBN 978-1-55379-773-9).

As an Indigenous scholar, I highly recommend *Potlatch as Pedagogy* to everyone and anyone wanting to know and learn about Indigenous oral tradition. This short, seven-chaptered book combines oral tradition, storytelling, and discussion, while also being an example of Indigenous research. The book comes to life with the stories and memories of Sara's father, Robert, as well as other family members and elders from the Haida community. As you read through, you will find some repetition; however, it is a storyteller's repetition that relies on the learner's and listener's ability to grasp what is being told. A good storyteller will always highlight the significance of the teachings as they flow through the words of the ancestors.

Potlatch as Pedagogy is a portrait of Haida culture, past and present, and of the revival of Haida cultural practices that were at the very brink of nonexistence, stemming from the combined legacies of colonialism, residential schools, and the Indian Act (as narrated in Chapter 3). For the Haida Nation, the government's ban on the Potlatch ceremony, as well as on their feasts and Totem Pole raising, had a profound impact on how traditional Haida culture was passed on to the next generation. This wonderful book focuses on processes of learning and coming to know cultural practices that resurfaced through the many stories and memories of Haida elders and the Davidson family. In Chapter 2, and throughout the book, these processes of learning are stressed as principles guiding action in several domains (such as teaching, learning, and research). These principles hold that learning emerges from strong relationships; that learning emerges from authentic experiences and curiosity; that learning occurs through observation, contribution, and recognition; and that learning honours the power of the mind. What emerges throughout this book is a clear view of how oral tradition was passed on, and how tradition remains authentic through the people actively putting it into practice.

The author, Sara Davidson, is both a researcher and an educator, and as an educator, she has seen the difficulties many of her students face with literacy. She believes that confronting these challenges allows students to pass through the doorway to the other side, to the side of literacy and beyond. She returned to university hoping to learn how to help her students “succeed” in a mainstream academic setting. However, her new education did not answer her questions. She returned to her father’s experience and what inspired him to complete high school. She explains that her goal became instead to gather teaching and learning strategies that would help support her students’ academic success. Her father, who did not originally consider himself an elder, but had since taken his rightful place as a traditional knowledge keeper within his community, began to share with her more broadly what he knew, and has come to know, about Haida culture.

Robert Davidson is an artist who, in his younger years, did not know much about Haida art until he attended high school in Vancouver, where he saw Haida art for the first time, on display. As a young man, Robert began to realize that his people were missing something and, by speaking with his elders, was inspired to create and bring back cultural art pieces that had played an important cultural role in Haida society prior to European contact and Christianity (this story is told in Chapter 4). For Robert, the transmission of spiritual knowledge was embedded within the cultural teachings and stories that had formed his traditional education. Sara explains that her father grew up in a different time than she did, as did her grandparents. Her father reminded Sara that “during his grandfather’s time, the culture was lived and the knowledge was common” (p. 21). Its existence was a way of life for the Haida Nation, but due to the effects of colonialism, several community members who attended residential school became targets of shame for not knowing their Haida culture and language. However, that knowledge – of culture and knowledge – was still there. Robert recalled that the elders were very careful with teaching protocol and ceremony. He explained that when the family would gather together, the elders would practice traditional protocols in private and under the guise of other common non-Indigenous (viz., Christian) holidays. The elders intended these gatherings to be places of learning, of learning the protocols, and understanding the reciprocity, that accompanies feasting and ceremony. These gatherings were used to “solidify their history with one another” (p. 55) and are pivotal moments in Haida history. They inspired the people, including Robert, to recall, remember, and share what they have learned about Haida culture and who they are as the Haida Nation.

Through one story, Robert explains how Raven used his mind to manifest the winds to pick up and blow away a canoe. Through this story, he reiterates how he has used the powers of the mind and visualization to accomplish and achieve the many goals in his own life, including completing his high school education. For Sara, the opportunity to learn Haida songs and protocols for ceremonies and feasts would not have been possible without her father sharing his memories

of learning through the elders' knowledge. Both Sara and her father Robert believe that learning is a responsibility. As an educator, your responsibility is to transfer that learning into your own knowledge and pass it on to and share it with the students you teach.

Potlatch as Pedagogy offers a view into contemporary lifeways of Haida peoples who have taken back their rightful place as teachers and knowledge holders of their own culture and history. I believe this book is a must-have. It must be read by those who are seeking to know, learn, and understand more about Indigenous ways of knowing, learning, and teaching. The writing is graciously geared for all readers; the book's flow is smooth and intentional as Sara leads the reader through her research questions about learning and/or re-learning cultural practices by way of the conversations she had with her father and the stories he tells, and the meanings and morals that have maintained Haida cultural values for centuries. The book, with its Indigenous guiding principles, is also recommended to those conducting research within an Indigenous context in the areas of education, teaching, and learning. It is also recommended for teachers who are seeking to learn about Indigenous ways of learning, teaching, and knowing, and/or who may have Indigenous students in their classrooms. The book provides a magnified look at Haida cultural practices brought forth through memory and storytelling. As such, it stands as an inspiration for other Indigenous Peoples. For Robert and Sara, father and daughter, the whole process of bringing the past into the present has been a learning journey of its own. For the Haida Nation, bringing their past into the present has rekindled a connection to their roots, "and as [they] honour and bring together the pieces of [their] ancient knowledge and [their] history, [they] will revive that connection once again" (p. 74) – for them and for others.