Earth Songs

Curriculum Guide

Educator's Guide

Artist: Glenn Patterson

Learning and Teaching in an Indigenous World
Welcome to the Earth Songs curriculum guide for educators. This guide is designed to provide educators with background information to facilitate the use of the Earth Songs in the classroom in a meaningful, informed and respectful manner.
The Gift

In the fall of 2007, a community of learners created four original songs inspired by traditional Indigenous music of Western Canada and the West Coast. Each song group was supported by an Indigenous song-maker. At the end of the term, the songs were gifted, along with a fifth song created by Songhees Nation member, Bradley Dick, to the Faculty of Education through a ceremony. In addition, four deer-hide hand drums were created and also gifted to the Faculty of Education. The intent of the gifts was to create songs that could be used freely by educators (instructors and students) to learn about and practice the art of Indigenous song making. The songs do not belong to any particular Nation or family and therefore can be used and shared freely. However, it remains imperative to acknowledge the songs’ origins as composed by a community of learners in the Fall 2007 UVIC Education course called Learning and Teaching in an Indigenous World held on Coast Salish territory (or in the case of Bradley Dick’s song, that he be acknowledged as the composer each time it is used).
Introduction

Music and song is an important part of many Indigenous cultures, including Coast and Straits Salish Nations, whose territory is the southern part of Vancouver Island and along the southwest coast of British Columbia and Washington. Victoria is located on Lekwungen and WSÁNEĆ territory, which includes Esquimalt, Songhees, Tsawout, Tsartlip, Pauquachin and Tseycum Nations. It is a sign of respect, wherever you live, to find out whose traditional territory you are on because every part of Canada is someone’s traditional territory.

In Coast Salish communities, music is comprised of the sounds of the drum and song, and is played for many reasons. As it is in many of the worlds’ cultures, there are different songs for different occasions, such as marriages, deaths, traditional games, spiritual and ceremonial events, and of course just for fun.

Some songs belong to individual families, some of whom have handed their songs down through the generations for hundreds and thousands of years. Other songs belong to ceremonies or masks that are owned by families. Only the family who owns a song can decide who can use it, and at least one member of the family must be present when the song is used. Songs are shown respect by being remembered and sung. It is a great disrespect to a song if it is not sung, or worse, if it gets forgotten. In many cultures, songs are thought to be alive because when we sing them, we are giving them the life-giving breath from our lungs. And like anything that is alive, songs need to be shown a great deal of respect.

Some Indigenous people believe that the sound of the drum is like the heartbeat of a nation. Most drums are made of wooden rings with an animal hide stretched across one side. Some nations have a teaching that when a person makes their first drum, they must give it away to show that they are generous and are of good heart. Drums are often thought of like a relative to a drum holder. So the drum is treated the same way as an honoured relative, by keeping it warm, and having a good and safe place for it to stay. Like songs, drums are also used for many purposes. For example, a healer may use a drum in healing ceremonies, and sometimes drums were used to ready for war. More importantly, when a person holds/owns a drum it is their responsibility to take care of that drum while they hold/own it. Together, drums and songs are a very important part of Indigenous ways of being.
The following is a suggested introduction for Indigenous songs and drums to elementary age children.

First and foremost, the teacher should be confident with their introduction and their use of the drums and songs. Here is a brief example of how you could introduce these songs to elementary age children within the context of a lesson about Indigenous Music:

These songs were created by a group of students at the University of Victoria. They were inspired by Indigenous ways of making songs. Different from many Indigenous songs, these (4) songs do not belong to any single family or Nation. That means that anyone can learn them and sing them. However, it is still important to always explain where the song(s) came from and how you came to be able to use the(se) songs.

(In the case of Bradley’s song, he should be acknowledged each time the song is taught to a new group of students or performed publicly.)

What are appropriate and respectful ways to use the songs--can we sing them?

The five songs and drums were gifted to the Faculty of Education, which meant they are for the faculty, instructors, staff and students to use and enjoy. They were gifted in the spirit of education and sharing to teach students, while carrying a message of understanding amongst peoples. The appropriate and respectful treatment of these songs is to keep them alive through use! It is a Coast/Straits Salish belief that a song is shown disrespect when it is not remembered and used, unless it is ceremonially “put away” for some reason.

Therefore, it is not only appropriate to use the songs, but it is imperative for ensuring the health and life of the song.
Can we add harmonies?

All five songs were gifted to the Faculty of Education. As such, you have the right to use them for the advancement of knowledge through education. Songs, like people, are alive and play an interactive role in their environment. It is not uncommon for songs to change over time. The addition of harmonies may be a natural part of the life of a song. You can use them as a soundtrack to accompany a slide show, or as models for creating your own songs as long as credit and acknowledgement is given to the creators of the song.

When considering alterations to your song, whether by improvising over top or changing the words, let common sense be your guide. If the lyrics of the song are in an Indigenous language, do you understand how changing the lyrics may affect the meaning of the song? Would the improvisation of words over top of existing words seem disrespectful? What is the intent for changing lyrics? Could doing this lead to a constructive class discussion on respect and honouring songs and their creators? If the songs are used as a learning instrument that encourages discussion, this simply demonstrates their versatility and usefulness in the academic environment.

The same process should emerge when considering accompanying the songs with a variety of instruments from various cultures. The first question might be: What is the purpose of engaging in this kind of activity? Certainly, the amalgamation of different instruments from varying cultures produces a sense of concord among peoples, and is encouraged. This, also, could create a good topic of discussion for the class.
Can we dance to them?

Any positive show of life and breath shown to the songs is healthy and productive. However, it is important to understand that many Indigenous cultures have certain dances that go with certain songs. One should never try to emulate any kind of ceremonial dance outside of that ceremony led by the appropriate people. Obviously, common sense should prevail; dancing in a mocking nature would be highly disrespectful and could be interpreted as racist.

Indigenous music reflects the vibrancy and resiliency of the culture. Dancing is an uplifting practice that serves several functions in Indigenous life, such as for ceremonies, and also for fun at powwows. Certain Indigenous nations have dances that are “social” and anyone can join in. It would be good to learn more about these during a focus on Indigenous music in your curriculum.

Can we perform them in concerts?

It would be appropriate to perform these songs in concerts, as that reflects the spirit and intent of the gift to use the songs in education and connecting people. The key items to remember when performing the songs publicly are: acknowledge the territory of the people where the songs are being performed; acknowledge the students and song leaders of the 2007 Earth Songs class who created them, and convey that the songs were gifted to the Faculty of Education for general use.
How are these songs the same as songs created in traditional circumstances by West coast First Nations peoples? How are they different?

The four songs that were created by the students have some distinct similarities and differences from traditional First Nations music. The Faculty of Education songs are similar in that they were created by people of the earth (hence the name Earth Songs) on Coast and Straits Salish territories; and were created with the guidance of Indigenous teachers Butch Dick, John Elliot, Glenn Patterson, Bradley Dick, and Fabian Quocksister with good thoughts, good hands and open hearts. These are important principles for Indigenous people in the process of creating music.

What is different about these songs and traditional Coast/Straits Salish songs is that families typically own traditional songs and pass them down through inheritance. Many traditional songs are very old, and many have very specific spiritual purposes that are not open for public listening. Also, First Nations traditional music is entwined with the histories of the peoples, which include a legacy of subjugation and colonisation. For the first half of the twentieth century, ceremonial practices were banned. This included singing, drumming and dancing. The ability to sing, drum and dance was outlawed for First Nations peoples for 68 years. Many communities resisted this discriminatory ban by continuing to perform their songs in the darkened rooms of peoples’ homes. As such, traditional Coast Salish music is laden with the stories, histories, laughter, sadness and strengths of many generations of First Nations people. This is important to bear in mind when playing the songs, because as the beat of the drum resonates through your bodies, and the song bursts from your lungs to fill the air, the ancestors from this territory are undoubtedly stirred and gather to rejoice in the music in which they participated during their lives. These songs are made from this land, in the spirit of the Indigenous peoples from time immemorial.
Drums

What is the best way to introduce the drums to elementary age children?

Much of the information provided for the songs can also be applied to the drums, as drums and songs together form an integral part of most Indigenous music, including Coast Salish music. These are a few important points pertaining specifically to the proper care and use of the drums:

- A drum is considered “alive” and needs to be treated as such.
- Each drum should have its own carrying case/bag.
- Because the drum is made of deer hide, it will become flat when cold or with changing temperatures and humidity, some can be warmed by gently rubbing the surface with the hand in a circular motion while others will require a open fire or other source of heat to warm the drum.
- A drum should never be used when the drummer has consumed any mood/mind altering substance. A period of four days is generally required to pass between the use of such substances and picking up a drum.
- It is not appropriate to touch someone else’s drum without the drum holder’s permission.
It is important to acknowledge that these songs and drums were made in the fall 2007 UVIC Education course titled *Learning and Teaching in an Indigenous World*, which has been offered five times thus far. This course emphasizes learning and teaching using the following principles of the Lil’wat Nation of Mount Currie, BC, shared with permission of Dr. Lorna Williams:

**Lil’wat Principles of Teaching and Learning:**

*Cwelelep*: being in a place of dissonance, experiencing uncertainty in anticipation of new learning, to spin like a dust storm.

*Kamucwkalha*: the felt energy indicating group attunement and the emergence of a common group purpose. Group is ready to work together, to listen to one another and speak without fear.

*Celhcelh*: each person is responsible for his/her learning. It means finding and taking advantage of all opportunities to learn and maintaining an openness to learning. Each person must take the initiative to become part of the learning community by finding his/her place and fitting into the community. It means offering what knowledge and expertise you have to benefit the communal work being carried out.

*Emhaka*: each person does the best he/she can at whatever the task and keeps an eye on others to be helpful. It means to work respectfully and with good thoughts and good hands.

*Responsibility*: each person is responsible for helping the team and the learning community to accomplish the task at hand in a good way, entering the work clear of anger and impatience.

*Relationship*: throughout the course each person will be conscious of developing and maintaining relationships—with the people, the task, the teachers and guides, and the communities beyond the learning community. It also means relating what you are experiencing to your past knowledge and to what you will do with what you are learning.

*Watchful listening*: an openness to listening beyond our own personal thoughts and assumptions, being aware and conscious of everything around you as you focus on the task at hand.

*Axekcal*: how teachers help us to locate the infinite capacity we all have as learners. Developing one’s own personal gifts and expertise in a holistic, respectful and balanced manner.

*Kat’iI’a*: finding stillness and quietness amidst our busyness and need to know.

*Good Hand*: to work with positive intent and an open heart.
This guide was created with the curiosities of the current Music Education faculty in mind. We hope it will be useful to student teachers and educators alike.

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Bradley Dick  
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Photo courtesy of UVic Photo Services

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