

Book Club Kit Discussion Guide

Potlatch as Pedagogy: Learning through Ceremony
by Robert Davidson
and Sara Florence Davidson

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Biography

Robert Davidson

Robert Davidson is one of the most respected and important contemporary artists in Canada. A Northwest Coast native of Haida descent, he is a master carver of totem poles and masks and works in a variety of other media as a printmaker, painter, and jeweller. A leading figure in the renaissance of Haida art and culture, Robert is best known as an impeccable craftsman whose creative and personal interpretation of traditional Haida form is unparalleled. He has also been recognized with many awards, including being named an Officer to the Order of Canada.

Sara Florence Davidson

Sara Florence Davidson (she/her) is a Haida/Settler Assistant Professor in Indigenous Education in the Faculty of Education at Simon Fraser University. Previously, she was an educator working with adolescents in the K-12 system in British Columbia and Yukon Territory. Sara is the co-author of *Potlatch as Pedagogy: Learning through Ceremony*, which she wrote with her father, and *Magical Beings of Haida Gwaii*, which she wrote with her stepmother, Terri-Lynn Williams-Davidson.

When she is not reading or writing, Sara can be found walking with her dog, drinking tea, or listening to stories and learning something new.

Source: **Publisher's website**



<https://www.portageandmainpress.com/Contributors/D/Davidson-Robert>

<https://www.portageandmainpress.com/Contributors/D/Davidson-Sara-Florence>



Review by Anita Miettunen

Review of Potlatch as Pedagogy: Learning Through Ceremony

March 15, 2019

Written by daughter-father team Sara Florence Davidson and Robert Davidson, *Potlatch as Pedagogy: Learning through Ceremony* is a short, yet richly-packed book of interest to a wide audience, but particularly to educators seeking more inclusive approaches of Indigenous ways of teaching and learning. Drawing from the professional work and life experiences of its co-authors – Dr. Sara Florence Davidson is a Haida educator and scholar, and Robert Davidson is an internationally renowned artist of Haida ancestry – *Potlatch as Pedagogy* combines “memories, stories, teachings, and potential educational practices.” In a straightforward, conversational tone, Sara Florence Davidson recounts the Davidson family’s personal history; the historical and cultural context of the potlatch ceremony within the social structure of the Haida people; the impact of the Potlatch Ban by the Canadian government from 1884-1951; the passing down of knowledge from Haida Elders to Robert Davidson; her experiences teaching Indigenous youth; and her relationship with her father.

An opening chapter explains how *Potlatch as Pedagogy* was developed. Initially, Sara Florence Davidson’s interest was in understanding how her father’s learning might help her classroom work. As she writes, “... I went to my father seeking a list of teaching strategies to use with my Indigenous students to support their academic success.” But instead of receiving a list, she came to understand, through her father’s life stories and the traditional Haida stories that he had learned and shared, certain themes which developed into nine principles (sk’ad’a) of learning and teaching. As Sara Florence Davidson explains, sk’ad’ada is the Haida word for “teach,” whose base sk’ad’a means “learn.” Through sharing excerpts of her interviews with her father, as well as her personal narrative, she describes the nine sk’ad’a as: learning through strong relationships; authentic experiences; curiosity; observation; contribution; recognizing and encouraging strengths; honouring the power of the mind; Indigenous history and stories; and spirituality and protocol.

As *Potlatch as Pedagogy* builds on Sara Florence Davidson’s interviews of her father, it serves to document and demonstrate her own learning through the guidance of “Elders and knowledge keepers instead of from books and courses.” Later sections trace the revitalization of the potlatch ceremony; touch upon residential schools; and recall Robert Davidson’s experiences as a young man with carving and raising a totem pole in his village in 1969 for the first time in almost one hundred years, and his experiences in attending and co-hosting potlatches through the ensuing years.

Although there is some repetition in *Potlatch as Pedagogy* and the stories and content don’t always flow in a linear way (which can slow down the reading process), the summary boxes included with certain chapters help reinforce content and connections to specific sk’ad’a. In the book’s final chapter, Sara Florence Davidson discusses how the Haida potlatch has been used as a form of pedagogy. She also expands upon each sk’ad’a with thoughts on how to incorporate these principles into action within contemporary educational settings. Overall, she shows how linking storytelling and lived experiences with each of the sk’ad’a can inform and strengthen pedagogy and lead to innovative teaching practices.

This is not a book to be read quickly; it requires reflection to fully appreciate its content, purpose, and value. But time spent with *Potlatch as Pedagogy* will connect you with the Davidsons’ stories and enrich

your understanding of Haida knowledge, culture, and historical struggles; and stimulate thought for considering

how Indigenous knowledge, storytelling, and pedagogies could be included in educational practices.

The back matter includes an Appendix with a timeline of feasts and potlatches (co)hosted by Robert Davidson and a list of references.

Source: **Canadian Review of Materials**

Review of Potlatch as Pedagogy: Learning Through Ceremony

Miettunen, A. (2019). Potlatch as pedagogy: Learning through ceremony [Review of the book *Potlatch as Pedagogy: Learning Through Ceremony* by R. Davidson and S.F. Davidson]. *CM: Canadian Review of Materials*, XXV(26). <https://www.cmreviews.ca/node/634>



Review by Sandra Deer

Potlatch as Pedagogy Review

December 16, 2022

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.

Source: **McGill Journal of Education / Revue Des Sciences De l'éducation De McGill**

Potlatch as Pedagogy Review

Deer, S. (2022). Potlatch as Pedagogy Review. *McGill Journal of Education / Revue Des Sciences De l'éducation De McGill*, 56(2/3), 337-339. <https://mje.mcgill.ca/article/view/9881>



Video Interview with David Bouchard

Blossom Moon with Sara Davidson

June 29, 2021

View and listen to this interview on the 13 Moons 13 Reads Video Podcast on YouTube:

https://youtu.be/_Cg4Us4M90M

Source: **13 Moons 13 Reads**

GoodMinds. (2021, June 29). *Blossom Moon with Sara Davidson* [Video].

YouTube. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_Cg4Us4M90M&t=3s



Audio Interview with Gale Picco

Season 1, Episode 13 – Sara Florence Davidson

October 21, 2021

Listen to this interview on the Talking Up podcast on its' website:

<https://www.thecharityreport.com/talking-up/episode-13-sara-florence-davidson/>

Source: **Talking Up**

Picco, G. (Host). (2021, October 21). Sara Florence Davidson (Season 1, Episode 13) [Audio podcast episode]. In Talking Up: A Podcast. The Charity Report.

<https://www.thecharityreport.com/talking-up/episode-13-sara-florence-davidson/>



Audio Interview with Jane Williams

Potlatch As Pedagogy: Learning Through Ceremony

February 8, 2019

Listen to this interview on the Redeye Collective podcast on the Internet Archive:

<https://archive.org/details/PotlatchAsPedagogyLearningThroughCeremony>

Source: **Redeye Collective**

Redeye Collective. (February 8, 2019). Potlatch as pedagogy: Learning through ceremony. [Audio podcast episode]. Vancouver Co-op Radio.

<https://archive.org/details/PotlatchAsPedagogyLearningThroughCeremony>



Discussion Questions

1. On page 10, Sara Florence Davidson says, “Each generation is responsible for learning the knowledge of the previous generation and making it meaningful in the present.” What have you learned from your own family and culture’s history that you are bringing to the present? How was that knowledge transmitted to you?
2. The first *sk’ad’a* or teaching principle that Davidson names is “Learning emerges from strong relationships.” Which relationships have taught you the most? What are the important ingredients of a strong relationship? How do you build that with your students or other people in your life?
3. For the second *sk’ad’a*, “Learning emerges from authentic experiences,” she defines this as learning that is “*applicable* to the students’ lives outside of school.” (p. 69) Have you had this kind of experience in your own education? How can you recreate that?
4. For the third *sk’ad’a*, “Learning emerges from curiosity,” how do you model curiosity in your day-to-day life? How comfortable are you with not having all the answers? Are you able to do work from a position of ignorance?
5. For the fourth *sk’ad’a*, “Learning occurs through observation,” Davidson emphasizes that this process takes time. What are you currently learning and how much time do you give yourself for it? How can you take observations further?
6. “Learning occurs through contribution” is the fifth *sk’ad’a*, and Davidson explains the two aspects of this as learning for the purpose of contributing and recognizing the importance of making contributions to our communities and families. How do you make someone feel that they are contributing to a group?
7. Robert Davidson was able to learn totem carving and pole raising and continue hosting potlatches and celebrations with the help of his family and community. Along the way, he made alliances and got feedback on what he was doing wrong. How much does your community and allies sustain you in your work? What role does criticism and feedback play in the way you teach and learn?
8. For the sixth *sk’ad’a*, “Learning occurs through recognizing and encouraging strengths.” How do we recognize strengths in others and in ourselves? Have anyone recognized your strength and encouraged your learning? What resulted from that experience?
9. The seventh *sk’ad’a* states that learning honours the power of the mind. A strong vision of the end-result and a commitment to it can help turn the idea to action. Do you practice any action mentally before doing it? Where else can you apply that technique in your life and work?

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10. “Learning honours history and story” is the eighth *sk’ad’a*. Sharing our stories can help bridge the generations. What is the oldest story you know about your family? Do you share stories about your younger self?
 11. The ninth and last *sk’ad’a* is that “Learning honours aspects of spirituality and protocol.” We live surrounded by people of various belief systems, which could be an integral part of their identities. How much of a role does spirituality play in your life? Do you think spirituality has a role in institutions like the academe?
 12. The book includes some of the stories behind potlatches Robert Davidson had hosted. Which one resonated with you most? Do you have any family or community celebrations and events that are meaningful to you?
 13. Sara Florence Davidson says that once she started working on this project, she realized the gaps in her own knowledge. Did reading this book make you realize the gaps in your own knowledge?

Discussion Themes

Education and Cultural Transmission | Storytelling | Family and Community Relations | Potlatch and Ceremony