

Exchanges Between Two Rivers: Possibilities for Teaching Writing in the Northwest Territories

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Abstract

In this paper, I reflect upon an action research investigation with experienced Non-Aboriginal teachers from the Northwest Territories into place-conscious writing practices. I focus on what the teachers said about the ongoing influences of Indigenous oral traditions on their writing pedagogies, using my own experiences as a Non-Aboriginal teacher in a Dene community as a heuristic. Finally, I consider the possibility that multiliteracies might provide a more dynamic conception of literacy that invites Northern student engagement through multimodal connections opening up spaces for Indigenous ways of knowing and being in approaches to teaching writing.

Keywords: Writing pedagogy, multiliteracies, Indigenous education, oral traditions.

Précis

Dans cet article, je réfléchis à une enquête de recherche-action avec les enseignants non-autochtones expérimentés provenant des Territoires du Nord-Ouest dans les pratiques d'écriture lieu-conscientes. Je me concentre sur ce que les enseignants ont dit au sujet des influences cours des traditions orales autochtones sur leurs pédagogies d'écriture, en utilisant mes propres expériences en tant que professeur non-Autochtones dans une communauté Dene comme heuristique. Enfin, je considère la possibilité que multilittératies pourraient fournir une conception plus dynamique de l'alphabétisation qui invite la participation des élèves du Nord grâce à des connexions multimodales ouvrir des espaces pour les modes de connaissance autochtones et d'être dans les approches de l'enseignement écrit.

Exchanges Between Two Rivers:

Possibilities for Teaching Writing in the Northwest Territories

I grew up in cottage country northeast of Toronto, Ontario and had no understanding of life in Indigenous communities before I left to teach in a Dene community of 1,200 people in Canada's Northwest Territories (NWT). Liidli Kue/Fort Simpson is located just above the Alberta and British Columbia border at the confluence of two great rivers. Closest to town is the shallow, murky brown Naechag'ah/Liard that originates in the Yukon before heading Northeast through British Columbia; furthest away is the deep, slate blue Dehcho/Mackenzie River that comes from Great Slave Lake and ran North into the Arctic Ocean in Inuvialuit territory. The two rivers, simultaneously distinct, intermingling and flowing within a common landscape, have always struck me as an apt metaphor for the two people that come together in Liidli Kue/Fort Simpson; roughly 60% of the population are Dene/Métis while 40% are non-Dene. I am not the only one who saw the metaphoric potential in this riverscape with all of the unseen forces that dynamically constitute both rivers. Peter Kulchyski (2006), an anthropologist who has worked in the community, found himself questioning which river might be swept up and carried along within the moral topography of this Northern place. There is no doubt that the economic impetus behind the move that displaced people from traditional territories to the town so that the land could be exploited by newcomers, points to the power of one 'river' to dictate the flow of existence for the other; however, the Dene are not without a will and intentions of their own: will born of resilience and intentions born out of time-immemorial commitments to place.

As a newcomer to the community, I grappled with how to teach high school English in Liidli Kue, the regional center of the Dehcho, in a way that honored the Dene

and Métis ways of knowing and being. The vast majority of teachers in the Northwest Territories come from the south as I did and the turn-over in staff is very high such that close to half of us were new the year I came. Government of the Northwest Territories educational policy documents from 1982 on have called for ‘culture-based’ education, however, it is not clear how to implement this pedagogy in Northern classrooms; sometimes the practices that teachers initiate are repetitious and reductionist. Dwayne Donald’s (2009) call for a pedagogy that does not divorce the philosophical foundation from implemented practices is of paramount importance; however, Indigenous and Western ways of teaching and learning are often treated as fundamentally different (Castagno & Brayboy, 2008). It is hard to know how to successfully and respectfully work within this paradox.

In the fourteen years I taught in Liidli Kue, I encountered individual parents, leaders, and elders in the community who wanted differing aims for their children’s education. It did not always follow that Indigenous people wanted to see Indigenous content, perspectives and approaches in Western schools (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006). Some said that the school should focus on “academics” and leave “culture” to the home; some said that there was too much emphasis placed on the local in school and what Fort Simpson students need is a broader sense of what is going on in the rest of the world; some said that the curriculum is completely irrelevant and what is necessary is more emphasis on the local and Dene traditional ways. Southern teachers varied in their willingness and comfort with incorporating Indigenous perspectives and knowledges in their programs of study. It is not possible to posit a contemporary unified vision for education originating in Denendeh, the territory of the Dene, against a monolithic

Western view as if one might pluck something whole and pure out of “the interstices of the colonial and the colonized” (Kanu, 2003, p. 77).

Overall, the Dene, Métis, Inuvialuit, and Inuit students of the Northwest Territories have lower rates of achievement than their non-Indigenous classmates and higher rates of early school leaving (Government of the Northwest Territories, 2011). Clearly, there are still fundamental disconnections between Indigenous students’ intellectual, spiritual, physical, and emotional selves and the system meant to educate them (Cherubini et al., 2009). Schools in the Northwest Territories, which vary in their degree of local control, can be the site for ongoing colonization but also the site for possible social transformation. I lived this tension for fourteen years which was further amplified by the fact that my subject matter is English, the imperialist language of colonial power and my particular interest is writing, a technology that did not exist in Northern Indigenous places prior to contact with Europeans. Of the six stands of language arts, which include reading, writing, viewing, representing, listening and speaking, I found writing to be the most challenging element to teach in my Northern classroom. During doctoral work, I investigated possibilities for place-conscious writing practices with eight experienced Non-Aboriginal teachers from six different linguistic regions in the Northwest Territories to see if we could think-together ways to engage Northern students.

In this paper, I will reflect upon some of the results of that action research investigation and the focus groups from the pilot study. Specifically, I will report what the teachers said about the ongoing impact of the oral tradition in the communities where they lived and the influence of those traditions on their pedagogies. I had not investigated the literature on oral traditions and written traditions for some time and the teachers’

ideas prompted an investigation. In the conclusion to the paper, I will consider the possibility that multiliteracies might provide a more dynamic conception of literacy that opens up spaces for Indigenous ways of knowing and being. According to the New London Group's (1996) original definition of multiliteracies, there are two key elements. One element recognizes the multiplicity of modes involved in meaning-making and the importance of integrating the textual with the visual, the audio, the spatial and the behavioural. The other involves the need "to focus on the realities of increasing local diversity and global connectedness" (p.61). I believe that this definition of literacy is more inclusive than the previous monolingualistic definition that posited all learners as homogenous and privileged print although I recognize, as Phyllis Steeves (2012) pointed out at a roundtable discussion of the Language and Literacy Researchers of Canada that there are other kinds of learning that are not "literacies". She argued that it is important not to subsume the ways of learning that serve traditional Indigenous ways of knowing and being under the "literacy" moniker as literacy carries with it Western epistemologies and ontologies.

My action research study, called *Northernvoices*, and the pilot study, which explored the possibilities for my methodology, took a hermeneutic approach to the gathering and analysis of the data. I met eight experienced intermediate/senior teachers of English for two face-to-face workshops and eight sessions on a wiki followed by semi-structured interviews (Patton, 2002) on a synchronous communication platform. The pilot study occurred with three focus group inquiries after I field-tested the writing practices at the 2009 Territorial Teachers' conference in Yellowknife. In the pilot and *Northernvoices* studies, writing was both the subject of the inquiry and the methodology as I asked the participating teachers to engage in writing practices designed to move the

conversation away from familiar answers to the question: What practices invite Northern students to write? In an Indigenous place, I hoped the writing workshops would invite the non-Indigenous teachers to consider the relationship to the many interconnecting dimensions of place. I follow Malpas (1999) for whom place “possesses a complex and differentiated structure made up of a set of interconnected and interdependent components-subject and object, space and time, self and other” (p.173). Within this complex structure, people construct a sense of place informed by local bodies of knowledge. Dene beliefs about place, like the Apache beliefs that Keith Basso (1996) studied, include conceptions of wisdom, notions of morality, customs and practices and time-honoured ways of imagining and storying the past. Place offers opportunities to evoke verbal and visual accounts of what has happened in localities. What people make of places is closely connected to what they make of themselves as members of a society and as inhabitants of the earth. N. Scott Momaday (1974) posits that people think and act with their environs as much as about and upon them, thereby weaving their spoken words and environs together in the social fabric of their lives.

Patrick Scott (2012) in his book *Talking tools: Faces of Aboriginal oral tradition in contemporary society* states “Dene culture is a land-based culture; Dene identity and stories come from the land” (p. 53). The recognition of the traditional land use area of a Dene family is known through oral stories of the land, reflected in place names (not in a sense of private ownership). Basso contends (1996) that for reasons such as this, Indigenous semiotic and symbolic systems should be considered moored in places and not separated from them. This philosophical frame provides challenges to a Western educational system conducted in English in Indigenous locations. The Northwest Territories is the land of the Dene, Métis, Inuvialuit and Inuit and home to eleven official

languages. In some communities, Indigenous languages are still strong while in others few people other than elders are proficient speakers. 64% of the students in the Northwest Territories are Indigenous; most of the Non-Aboriginal students live in Yellowknife the capital of the Northwest Territories and the hub of the diamond mining industry; some live in the regional centers.

The findings of my investigation offer no ‘best practices’ for classrooms in the NWT; no essentialist views about how to work with ‘the Aboriginal learner’ and no technocratic solutions for the difficulties many Indigenous students in the NWT seem to encounter with writing. Within a conception of teaching and learning construed as “a movement that transcends the complete control of those involved, while requiring their participation” (Gallagher, 1992, p. 180) the teacher and students are in a hermeneutic situation. The teacher must enter into the way of that movement to prompt student learning by fostering trusting relationships, drawing from a repertoire of diverse strategies, offering relevant resources, and inviting students’ perspectives and action. The teacher directs attention by creating constraints that will allow for conscious engagement by his or her students. In an Indigenous place, Non-Aboriginal teachers will need to dwell in tension and ambiguity and resist the desire to secure and fix meaning. Since they will inevitably bring their prejudices to bear on any given pedagogic situation, they must learn to recognize that their initial response: ‘this is the-way-things-should-be’, is not the only possibility.

The Ongoing Influence of Oral Traditions

In the action research study called *Northernvoices*, the teachers spoke about a number of writing practices they employed in the localities where they teach (one from

Yellowknife and the others from regional centers). The teachers spoke about their successes with generative practices such as quick writes, setting constraints that allowed students to write out of their experience and inquire into their interests; the importance of working with and from models and the necessity of anticipating “shut-down” so that students could remain engaged and build their confidence as writers. In two of the focus groups in the pilot study, teachers discussed the ongoing influence of oral traditions and although this topic did not take root in the *Northernvoices* study, the energized conviction in the focus groups sparked my own thinking. In the late eighties, when I began teaching in the NWT, ‘the culture clash’ between Western and Indigenous traditions was the explanatory metaphor of the time. I had read Walter Ong’s (1982) *Orality and Literacy* but hadn’t found his understanding of oral tradition overly helpful for my teaching practice. I don’t think of oral traditions as a step in the evolution toward a written tradition. Thinking about Ong’s ideas had prompted me, however, to think about the role and function of orality in my classroom; a topic I had not previously explored. Additionally, the work prompted my inquiry into Western discourse patterns; something I had previously taken for granted.

Teachers in the *Northernvoices* study made the distinction between orality and oral tradition. Orality refers to verbal expression, particularly as it applies to societies where writing technology did not exist until recently while oral tradition is the history, teachings, and traditions that are transmitted orally. Rene Hulan and Renate Eigenbrod (2008) define oral traditions as “distinct ways of knowing and the means by which knowledge is reproduced, preserved and conveyed from generation to generation”; they are “the foundation of Aboriginal societies”(p.7). Oral traditions in the NWT include storytelling and speeches, drumming and drum dancing and ceremonies. The ongoing

influence of oral traditions can have very simplistic rendering in common parlance among Non-Aboriginal people in the NWT. I have heard it said that because students come from an oral tradition they should be asked to do things orally but this oversimplifies the features of oral traditions and overlooks the worldview expressed in those traditions. While I believe that orality is a neglected mode in schools, one that deserves renewed attention and concerted reflective time for planning learning activities, it should not be over-privileged to the detriment of writing in Northern schools.

Many of the teachers in the *Northernvoices* study were not as convinced as the teachers who taught in the smaller, almost exclusively Dene communities in the Northwest Territories, that oral traditions have a significant impact on their students' lives. In their conversations, the teachers from regional centers defined oral tradition as the passing down of historical or mythical narratives. The teachers in the focus groups, defined oral tradition more broadly to include worldviews, and ways of being and learning that are communicated orally; these teachers considered the impact of the oral traditions on the way they taught writing and discussed their attempts to find a "mutually beneficial meeting place where each has a function" (Archibald, 2008, p. 93). The teachers saw a respect for the power of the word in Dene oral traditions such that spoken words in oratory and stories were consciously chosen not only for semantic reasons but also for stylistic reasons to augment impact on listeners. Writing is learned more consciously than speech although Frank Malloway, a Stó:lō elder, told Joanne Archibald (2008) that the voices of storytellers were developed through conscious practices. Often one thinks of the mentoring process in a storytelling as emphasizing the repetition that develops the content of these stories but oratory skills were also developed through a close relationship with a skilled storyteller.

Relationship is critical in storytelling. Cruikshank (2000), in her study of the oral narratives of Indigenous women elders in the Yukon, relates how the same story can be employed for different meanings to different audiences. When engaged with a story as a strategy for communication, Mrs. Sidney, an elder whose stories Cruikshank heard over many years, “shows first what a story *says* and then what it can *do* (p.xv). Oral narratives are a part of a communicative process and not simply fixed texts about empirical practical or historical cultural knowledge to be transmitted from one generation to the next. The oral traditions of the Dene tell of their spiritual relationship with the land. “This spirituality encompasses who they are and why they are there. Like all other living things in that particular place, they were placed there by the Creator” (Scott, 2012, p. 57). Cruikshank’s work (1994) points to the importance of stories about colonial experience which often contradict the histories told by the colonizers. The storytelling aspect of an oral tradition does not simply tell about the past; it sets guidelines for the present and points to the possibilities for the future. Spoken words continue to be an important part of an enduring tradition that includes addressing important issues during social upheaval. Cruikshank argues that the distinction the social sciences make between adaptive behaviors and expressive forms is inappropriate in contexts where people see storytelling as central to the ongoing reproduction of their culture.

Oral Traditions and the Teachers’ Writing Pedagogies

In the *Northernvoices* study, the teachers who questioned whether oral traditions persisted, pointed to causal Western influences that had diminished traditional social practices. But in the pilot study where the participants asserted that despite “several decades of contact” the oral tradition continues, Andrea, one of the participants, said

“Oral tradition doesn’t just mean the passing down of stories; it’s about how well you can lie.” At this, Marlee a teacher from a Yellowknife school, laughed, and Andrea qualified her comment by saying, “Singer says that: When I was a child I was a liar and now I’m grown up I’m a storyteller.” The group had been talking previously about how they encouraged their students to think of writing as “lying” and “stealing.” Their emphasis in this conversation was not so much on what a story says or what it can do but on how to work with the story. Vera said she advised her students to: “Steal words and phrases from other authors to embellish the truth of your story—the truth being the idea that compelled you to write in the first place.” Marlee added that she began her “dash three” classes (sometimes called remedial, locally developed or basic level in other Canadian jurisdictions), which often include a high percentage of Indigenous students, by listening to each other’s stories. Andrea added that she did that too and for fun, “...we take the lie of the day and the lie of the week and from that we can build a story.” The lies, to which the teachers spoke, were anecdotes that drew from real events with student exaggerated elements or were anecdotes that had no basis in actual events but contained plausible elements that would convince others that one was in fact, ‘telling the truth.’

To the teachers in the pilot study focus groups, recognizing the ongoing influence of the oral traditions of the communities meant that they worked with metaphor in their writing pedagogies. In their 1997 study, Cleary and Peacock pointed to the ability of many Indigenous students to make the necessary connections in stories from what Neal McLeod (2007) would call collective memory. McLeod writes about *nehiyawiwin* (Creeness) which is lived memory held in stories and relationships and involves the spiritual dimension of experience, not only the physical experiences of the immediate world. These stories that make connections rely on metaphoric abstraction. The teachers

found metaphor essential to instruction, in general, and had a lengthy conversation about its usefulness during the revision process.

Andrea, from a small fly-in Dene community, felt that revision was “unnatural” for her students. She speculated that this was due to the primacy of communication through speech in day to day life in her community; she also said she thought her students took the time to speak carefully, pointing to the limitations that exist in speech to revise an oral text as it is spoken. She suggested that while one can edit one’s phrases through clarifying what one means or take the story in a different direction, there is little possibility for the structural overhaul that the revision of writing often demands. When asking her students to revise their written work, she found it useful to make connections to other practices that required “revising.” Marlee, said she, too, asked her students to tell stories about times they had ‘revised’ practices in their lives. She provided the example, of a story a student told the class about fixing his car, and shared the connections she made from that ‘revision’ to revision in writing.

These teachers also explored the connection between the ongoing influence of the oral tradition and the student’s ability to respond and represent visually. Andrea said: “I think storytelling lends itself to visualizing—to seeing the concept—and as soon as the kids start to put labels to things, it changes the nature of how they view it. When they don’t have the word to attach to the visual, it becomes very difficult for them to express...I’m thinking that...some kind of visual element—drawing, painting, sculpture, whatever—says more than the written word does. It takes a long time to get the written words out.”

Teachers in both the pilot and action research study thought that many of their Indigenous students were very good visual learners, but reflecting upon how this facility

might connect to writing practices took many pathways in their conversations. One participant from the action research study suggested that drawing “may jog students’ memories” and could be used as a generative practice for writing. Teachers from the smaller communities in the pilot study said that their students would draw and paint much more readily than they would “come to the word.” Karen, a Non-Aboriginal teacher born in the North, reminded us that outside of any question of whether students are innately “visual learners” we, in schools, begin the schooling process by asking them to draw and paint. Tara, from a Yellowknife high school, suggested that her students were very resistant to drawing or painting because they see it as “a very elementary way of expressing” themselves. She suggested that school narratives about what is important had implied that drawing belongs “lower on the scale.”

Samantha, a high school teacher in an Inuvialuit/Dene community, spoke of the students’ propensity with visual texts but admitted that she didn’t ask her students to produce them frequently; however, she did ask her students to make sense of photographs, art reproductions and illustrations in her English class. She reported that she found it easier to generate analysis of a visual text than analysis of a literary text because students feel “there is so much to pull out.” Other teachers chimed in to say that they did ask students to respond visually to literary texts and also spoke about using visuals to generate print texts. Tara said she often asked students to represent concepts visually, particularly theme which she felt her students found difficult to put into words. After they had represented the theme of a text, visually, she asked them to supplement their visual with an oral explanation.

The teachers felt that visual images were less threatening to students than print. Some of the teachers in that focus group thought that perhaps it was because visual

images are more open to interpretation, while Marlee felt that visual images might allow the viewer to make a more personal connection to the image because an artist does not seem as “present” as a writer. With writing, one assumes that more of the writer is there “on the line” than presumably the artist is present in the brush stroke or movement of clay. Marlee declared that the students, as viewers of visual texts and readers of print texts, felt they had “more of a right to engage” with visual texts.

This conversation left me wondering what we communicate to students about visual and print texts. As a former Art teacher as well as an English teacher, I knew of Art teachers who taught as though the artist’s intention in a work of art was all that mattered. Students in the classrooms of those teachers required the interpretation of an expert to make sense of painting and drawings as much as the students in English classrooms, oriented by a formalist approach, required the expert exegesis of the teacher in order to make sense of a literary print text. Perhaps high school English teachers are less likely to take a formalist stance to visual texts since the “texts” that form the repertoire for English classes has only recently broadened to include dynamic and static visual texts. English teachers may not be educated enough to speak from an expert stance and therefore encourage their students to respond personally rather than critically to visual texts. In English courses, I suspect that we do not spend as much time asking the students to explore how a visual text makes meaning or to consider the relationships between visual images and print in texts that have both as we do to print. Laurence, one of the participants in the *Northernvoices* action research study, suggested teachers must have some background in the elements and principles of visual design and doubted that that had been part of people’s formal education in teaching.

Northern Students' Facility with Information Communications Technology

Many teachers in the pilot and the action research study spoke about their successes with writing projects that involved Information Communication Technology (ICT) because it afforded the opportunity to work in modes that integrate written text with other textual possibilities. Andrea said: "Our kids are really very excited when they can use photographed images, construct a PowerPoint presentation and add short pieces of text." Other teachers supported this claim and suggested software such as Comic Life was effective. Marilyn stated: "Kids can take images they snap outside or wherever and use them as backdrop to construct cartoons, comic strips, graphic novels...so there's a melding of Native and non-Native forms of writing." But some teachers noted that while the students enjoy using visuals they were not always careful in their selection or use of visuals. Laurence said the e-zines created in his class, "lacked substance." There was some discussion about why this might be and again the conversation turned to the necessary background information that teachers and students require to make effective choices.

Although teachers reported that their students' reactions were enthusiastic in response to using ICT, the teachers' reactions were less enthusiastic when they considered the amount of time they had committed from class as measured against the learning that occurred. For example, Margaret, a participant in the *Northernvoices* study, recounted fruitful experiences with video projects but also mentioned how time consuming the editing process can be. Other teachers said that the lengthy time requirement had deterred them from taking on video more frequently because they had to "nag" students to revise and edit "the first draft" of their videos as much as they nagged

for the revision of first draft writing. Teachers also felt that there might be a clash between the purposes and audiences of students' out-of-school literacy practices with ICT which may interfere with the educational purposes the teacher has in mind. A post on YouTube, meant to elicit laughter, may not require the editing necessitated for a learning project.

In addition to resisting editing of multimedia presentations, teachers indicated that their students resisted the analysis of static and dynamic visual texts. For example, while photographs played an important part as a visual stimulus for writing in many of the teacher's pedagogies, and was an important part of students' out-of-school literacy practices such as posting on Facebook, teachers expressed concern that students struggled with analyzing a photograph. Similarly, the teachers argued that it did not follow that because students are avid watchers of film, they will possess, or be that interested in acquiring, the language needed to talk about it. Furthermore, because students have established practices with the way they approach film, they often resisted the practices and habits of mind the teachers tried to establish. Margaret said that her students reported that while the same film may be viewed many times over, they rarely watched the film from beginning to end. In their homes, when someone leaves the room for a short amount of time such as required to retrieve a snack or take a bathroom break, the film is not paused. Eric, a teacher from a regional center, added that his students mentioned this at-home practice and complained vociferously about his practice of stopping the film to direct the students' attention to something. The teachers felt that the students' resistance to engaging with analysis of visual texts impeded their ability to work consciously to make effective choices with these types of texts.

The Exigencies of the Local in a Pedagogy of Multiliteracies

The teachers' comments about their Indigenous students' propensity for oral and visual modes are presented with the cautionary reminder that it is dangerous to reduce ideas about any learners to one-dimensional proportions (Lomawaima & McCarty, 2006, p. 21). Many of the students in the NWT may well manifest a preference for oral and visual modes derived from culturally-rooted practices that produce distinct orientations toward teaching and learning (The Alberta Education Department, 2005), but it is also possible, that, like so many of their contemporaries who live elsewhere, they are comfortable in a multimodal world. Many of the teachers in the studies noted, as has been asserted by Kress (2003), that the communicational world of which we are all a part is becoming increasingly visual. Literacy practices as they related to Information Communication Technology (ICT) are becoming central to effective English education in these times of rapidly evolving means of communication (Swenson, 2006) and the Northwest Territories is no exception (although there are localities where issues with internet service means that education using ICT is an unpredictable process).

Kress's (2003) understanding of what it means to engage students in multimodal learning experiences goes beyond a list of new activities for the teacher to try in the classroom. Kress believes that new literacies shape the way one thinks and responds to the world but whether one concurs or sees ICT only as an educative tool, new literacies can offer authentic reasons to create meaning in educational contexts and provide students with opportunities to explore interaction between multiple modalities (tactile, visual, auditory, etc.). To learn within this context, students need to be able to make sense of and apply the semiotic systems of language, still and moving images, music and

sound. Moving beyond a conception of writing pedagogy that rests solely within linguistic systems to include multiple semiotic systems may allow for closer connections to traditions that are not grounded in linguistics. Over my years in the North, I have had conversations (in English because I do not speak a Dene language) with elders about their experiences with signs and traces on the land. To date, we have not been able to find the right English word to name what the elders are doing on the land with those signs. When we say they are “reading” the land we are right back to the linguistic system that will not suffice to characterise the experience they are describing. Northern teachers may require a verb from a Dene, Inuvialuit or Inuit language to properly define the activity of interpreting the signs of the land.

The diversity of languages in the world is a reality with which most North Americans are well aware; most people accept that languages vary according to social and cultural contexts. Long-standing narratives about print literacies in schools deny their biases and omissions. In schools, writing is a skill or a tool and its political nature has long been shrouded in a veil of innocence, ignorance, or misrepresentation but new literacies cannot feign such neutrality. Even for young text creators, it is well understood that multimodal texts have been consciously constructed to share perspectives in a particular way. The selection process that goes into the text to shape attitudes, values and behaviours has been raised to a level of consciousness that is not always practiced with print literacies in schools. Being multiliterate requires one to be critical about who is included or excluded in a text and to ask how certain groups are portrayed.

The implications for writing pedagogies within a multiliteracies frame will include a greater reliance on collaborative writing for an audience other than the teacher which could lessen some of the teacher’s power to determine content and the manner in

which it is expressed. A pedagogy of multiliteracies that makes space for informed multimodal approaches will mean shifts in the way we approach the subject discipline called Language Arts and therefore the way we think about teaching writing. Language Arts might actually broaden to recognize languages other than English, Englishes other than 'standard English', ways of organizing the ideas in texts other than longstanding Western rhetorical structures, and textual voices recognizable in the localities that create them. Writing practices grounded in a pedagogy of multiliteracies might encourage closer connections to the ways of being and knowing and doing in Indigenous places which ultimately invite more students in the NWT to write.

But digital possibilities for writing may not necessarily be more respectful of local concerns than print literacy. Marie Battiste's (2000, p. 192) assertion that "the existing curriculum has given Aboriginal people new knowledge to help them participate in Canadian society, but it has not empowered Aboriginal identity by promoting an understanding of Aboriginal worldviews" is as relevant to this technology as to print technology. New literacies are also as likely to gloss over the ongoing damaging colonial legacy in education as print-centric literacy. The possibility for social transformation may exist through the use of ICT it does so only when purposes are defined by the user.

In the February pilot, Karen, the Northern-born participant, felt that, although our Northern educational rhetoric is committed to maintaining the cultural integrity of Northern Indigenous students as they acquire skills to live biculturally, there are only "a gifted few who can easily move between two worlds." As for the southern teacher's role, she maintained that just because a teacher recognizes that he or she is from a dominant culture and that this culture is not the norm of the community, it doesn't mean "by any stretch of the imagination that a bridge has been built from one to another." She was

convinced that Indigenous individuals who walk in two worlds had built their own bridge; schools had not contributed to this construction; moreover, this teacher was concerned that schools continued to diminish cultural voices. Her critique points to the necessity for overcoming the limitations of traditional approaches through negotiation of the multiple linguistic and cultural differences within a society. The New London group (1996) asserts that this is central to the pragmatics “of the working, civic, and private lives of students” (p.60). Non-Aboriginal teachers who work in a Western system in an Indigenous community must be willing to be vulnerable and to learn. They must be willing to remain open to the learners in the classroom and to the members of the human and more-than-human community in the places where they teach. Southern teachers will approach possibilities for pedagogic practices from the traditions that have informed their own outlook. For a vital exchange of ideas, there has to be room for the expression of worldviews and forms that will strike them as unfamiliar.

It is not clear how new literacies made possible through ICT can foster learning across the many levels involved in education. As Kirkness & Barnhardt (1991) note, Indigenous communities desire an education that will bring them “not just empowerment as individuals but empowerment as bands, as tribes, as nations, and as people” (p. 3). In many communities in the North, I have heard elders and other educational leaders express concern that ICT attracts students to popular Western culture taking them further and further away from the practices of their ancestors. But while, there are some Indigenous public intellectuals, elders and leaders who consider new literacies a threat to traditional ways of being, there are those who are interested in the way that new technologies can support the literacies necessary for economic and community well-being and support a renaissance of Indigenous traditions. Scott (2012) writes about the possibility that cyber-

tools could contribute to a revitalization of Indigenous languages. Innis as cited in Cruikshank (2000) maintained that oral tradition gives vitality to the written word and actively prevents centrality of power. A society that deeply values its oral tradition cannot be disciplined to the point of political unity by larger forces. With the rise of the possibilities for administration in societies that have taken on writing technology for the purpose of creating this unity, comes classification and the authorization of official observations and statistics in written texts. Colonialism is both economic and intellectual; while the knowledge produced supposedly serves those being administered, it does so at the expense of regional traditions. In the *Northernvoices* study, Eric asserted that “digital storytelling may well be the new oral tradition”; perhaps the flexibility of digital media could support a reconnaissance of collective memory and knowledge and a gathering place for critique of colonizing practices.

A Possible Gathering Place

A conception of multiliteracies might allow for writing pedagogies that meet the demands and needs, aspirations and appreciations of the local. New literacies may invite students to draw on their own experiences and semiotic literacy practices to make meaning. Defining literacy needs by thinking through the more dynamic and fluid conception of multiliteracies could make space for the rich possibilities of the Dene worldview in writing and help develop the thinking and practices deemed necessary by citizens of Indigenous communities. The two rivers that run side-by-side in Fort Simpson represent a mutual exchange. In the spirit of this exchange, it is imperative that the potential for new literacies be explored with the active involvement of the members of the communities within a framework that recognizes Indigenous people’s right to make

critical decisions. In many Northern communities, only a few teachers are Dene, Métis, Inuvialuit or Inuit. Most teachers are from southern Canada; they possess knowledge about Western educational systems but are guests in Indigenous communities. The multiple possibilities for writing practices in the Northwest Territories must meet the always-in-flux needs of the community; they need to provide students the opportunity to explore who they are, where they live, what they wish to express and understand in a manner conducive with their thinking and sensibilities.

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